

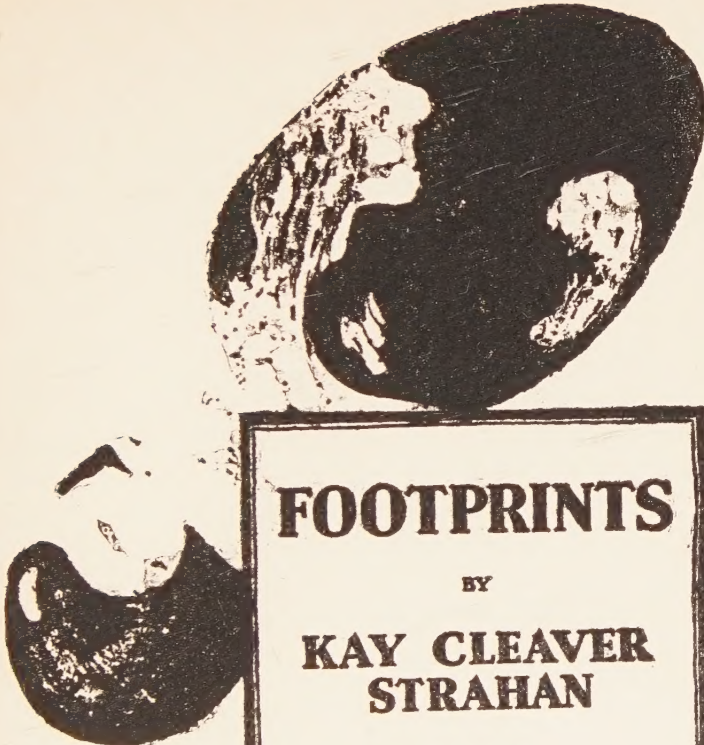
FOOTPRINTS





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BY

**KAY CLEAVER
STRAHAN**



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CHAPTER I

I

THE heavy glass and bronze door revolved, and released from its sections, out of the grizzly November mist and into the rosy and fragrant hotel lobby, malice and envy, joy and enthusiasm, vanity and greed. Fear, masked with dignity, wrapped in sealskin and topped with a charming bright red hat, came quickly and alone.

Two egg-shaped matrons glanced, lengthened and set their glances.

Purple-and-henna breathed, "Beautiful wrap."

"I'll tell you about her in a minute." Brown-and-gold spoke from her throat.

Their gazes followed the sealskin down the long strip of Mosul to the mahogany desk behind which a glossy clerk suddenly discovered reverence and added it to his attitude.

"She's one of the Quilters," Brown-and-gold informed. "They are among the best-known families here in Oregon. They have an enormous ranch over east of the mountains in Quilter County; half of that country over there seems to be named for them. They're mil-

lionaires. Ken says everything they touch turns into money.

"I've never met her—exactly; that's why I didn't speak. But she was at a tea where I was, two years ago; it was given for the blind. Quilters are supposed to be very charitable; but why shouldn't they be? As I told Ken, a dollar doesn't mean any more to them than a thin dime does to us." She paused to sigh.

"Does she live here at this hotel?"

"No. No—she lives out at the ranch. I can't imagine anyone wanting to live away from things, like that. The ranch is beautiful, though; quite a show place. Too bad you're leaving so soon—we might motor over to see it. Her brother, Neal Quilter, has been stopping here for a couple of days. I suppose she is here to see him. I've seen him twice lately in the dining room. He is awfully handsome—a bachelor, too. Will you look at the bellhop sliding to ring the elevator bell for her? I'm always allowed to ring it for myself. I hope she has to wait as long for that elevator as I usually do. The service here seems to be getting worse and worse; and, considering the prices they ask——"

"She's as slim as an old maid. Or is she married?"

"She's a widow. Judith Quilter Whitefield. Has been, for years and years. Funny she's never married again, with her money. She's kind of sweet looking yet, don't you think? I guess she just didn't want to marry. I don't blame her; why should she? She toured Europe last year with her sister, Lucy Quilter Cerini, and her husband——"

"Oh! Is that who she is? I didn't connect the names

at all. I reviewed one of Lucy Quilter Cerini's books for our ladies' literary society, back home, last year. I remember I found then that she was born in Oregon, but I didn't place her at first. So she's her sister?"

"Yes. I've never read any of her works. Was the book you read good?"

"Well—yes. You know she's very highly spoken of——"

The elevator door slid open, clinked shut.

Judith looked into the panelled mirror. She was too pale. She ducked her head and pinched pink into her cheeks with trembling fingers.

"Fifth floor, madam. To your right."

Five hundred and two—buckle my shoe. Five hundred and four—shut the door. Five hundred and—— How slyly, furtively soft these felt-padded carpets were. They had turned her into a sleuth, creeping, sneaking up on Neal. She wished that her advent might have been heralded by at least the smart clicking of heels. One could not, of course, whistle down hotel corridors. Perhaps she should have asked the clerk to telephone. But no, last night and again this morning she had thought and thought of that, and had rejected it.

Five hundred and sixteen. She paused, unfastened her fur collar and set it back from her firm white throat. She unclasped her handbag, took from it a gold locket of the sort that dangled from long bead chains in the eighteen nineties, and snapped it open. In one of its circles was the picture of an old gentleman with a white,

squarely cut beard, a wide brow, small sensitive nostrils, and a humorous quirk near the eyes that miraculously saved the face from the frailty of saintliness. In the opposite circle, printed in tiny letters, was, Judith had long thought, a truer portrait of her grandfather. He had called it a rule of conduct, and had given it to her during the happiest period of her life: just after she and Gregory Whitefield had announced their engagement; months before the suspicion that "Greg's bad cold" could be serious.

"Judith Quilter," the words read. "Achieve tranquillity."

Greg had never fully understood. Once, during those tremulous months in Colorado, when all life's worth hung on the slender thread of mercury in the clinical thermometer, he had asked, when she had opened the locket: "What's the magic of it, dear? How does it make things better for you?"

"It doesn't," she had declared. "Not a bit. All it does is to make me better for things."

Twenty-eight years ago; and now, still: "Judith Quilter. Achieve tranquillity."

She closed the locket, tucked it into the perfumed silk of her bag, pulled off her glove. At any rate, her knock should not sound surreptitious.

She snatched her hand from the door and put its knuckles to her parted lips. "Oh, dear!" she whispered. How could she have done that? How could she have produced that insultingly authoritative racket, which must, because of its very quarrelsomeness, be met with the rebuke of this smothering silence?

"Judy! You doggone pesty little hound!" The kiss prickled at the sides, but it was heavily, satisfactorily, smokily Neal.

"Golly, but you're pretty, Jude. Been pinching your cheeks, I'll bet a dollar——"

"Look, dear. My new hat."

"Yes, at your age! Running around buying gaudy red hats and smelling of violets—no, of one violet. Stand off; let's have a look at you—you friendly little Jezebel, you!"

"But, Neal, don't you like the new hat?"

"Not much. It's too shockingly becoming. But, whither, Judy? I thought I left you at home forcing Lucy's babies to entertain your guest?"

"I brought Ursula with me, silly. We felt the need for some shopping so we motored over yesterday evening. We got in late, and rose rather late this morning. But there's been time for the hat, and some toys, and luncheon. Then I happened to think you might have tea with us, later; so I've run up to ask you."

"Your naïveté is faultless, darling."

"Neal! If you have to be a killjoy, you might try to be a humane one."

Achieve tranquillity. Do not notice the shadow, dimming the splendid blondness, the averted eyes, the contracted shoulders.

"Judith, how did you know that I was here?"

"But, dear, where should you be? You have never stayed at another hotel in Portland, have you? I felt a traitor myself. But I did wish to impress Ursula with the glories of the Trensonian. I think, though, Neal,

that before you left you might have stuck a note on your pincushion, or——”

“Drop it, Jude. Is Ursula going back to Q 2 with you?”

“Did she bore you? Was it she who drove you away, silly?”

“Heavy tact. You know and I know; so, what’s the use? I’m mad about her. Repellent, isn’t it? A man of my age. I’m forty-six damn years old.”

“Yes, so you say. But Ursula isn’t a young girl. She has been a widow for eight years. She loves our West, and our Q 2, and——”

“You’re as sentimental as a hammock.”

“I don’t care. She does. And she loves you, too, and has for the past three years. You’d have known it if you hadn’t been blind. Neal—— What is it?”

Merely a dream: a preposterous dream, about an absurd play in which a man, who looked like Neal, went towering, shaking blond fists at his own shoulders; went muttering, giving an amusingly over-acted performance of rage. Neal, who was always gentle and funny and kind, would laugh at such exaggerations and say, “the cross-patch,” or something of the sort. Though, if Neal were ill, he might—— Lucy said that Neal was ill, very ill. Lucy was a genius. She should be here. Judith was a simple, stupid old woman. Judith Quilter. Achieve tranquillity.

“Sorry, Neal, if I was inept. Something seems to be quite the trouble. Perhaps, if you’d care to tell me, I might understand.”

“Understand?” he accepted the word and seemed

for a moment to caress it. "Understand!" he snarled it to pieces and flung it back, a shattered brutality. "Try understanding this, then. And, when you've finished with it, give it to the graceful Ursula, and see whether she can understand——"

"Neal, dear! Don't!"

"Don't! I thought not. You've guessed it, of course. You and Lucy guessed it years ago, together. And now you tell me—don't. Don't tell the truth. Keep my secret, since I've kept it only a lifetime. God, what I've lived through! Sorry. Almost began on that foxy Spartan stuff. No matter. I've kept my mouth shut. I promised. Or—did I? Sometimes I think my life has been pinned shut with a promise. Sometimes I think it has been fear, pride—— Take your choice. I've kept my secret. And I would have kept it if you'd let me alone. It's your fault. You brought Ursula. Bent on your matchmaking mummery. I came away, didn't I? Here you are, with Ursula in the offing. Tracking me down, sneaking—— Sorry. You're sweet, Judy. But I tell you, you've forced a confidence. You've forced me, and I'm glad of it, into the luxury of a confession. Take it!

"I killed Father. I did, I tell you. I knew about the insurance. It seemed the only way out. I fooled them all. I cut the red mask from Olympe's satin frock. I—— Judy, don't look like that. Put your new hat on. Stop rumpling your hair. Lovely gray hair you have, Judy. See, dear, it needn't matter a lot now—about the murder. We'll never tell it—you and I? It needn't matter at all—except for Ursula. I can't marry her. I can't ever marry,

Jude. That needn't matter. I've never cared a lot about marrying. Loathed women, mostly. All but you girls, and—Ursula.

“Think we'd better tell Ursula? Think that's the immediate decency required? She'll run away back to her Italy, then, and thank her stars she's well out of this. She wouldn't tell on me, do you think? I'd hate being hanged, you know. All the aspects—personal and public, is that the way it goes?—of hanging I'd hate _____”

“Neal——”

“Wait, Judy. I want the straight of this. The low-down on it. Am I mad? Wasn't that why Lucy had the psychiatrist visiting at Q 2? No, not what you are thinking. I committed the murder. I'm guilty—guilty as a dog. But am I mad? I might well be, having done in a member of the family. Do you remember, wasn't Aunt Gracia a bit mad? All that bunk of her religion—that Siloamite stuff? We none of us ever admitted it, of course. And Father—— I wonder whether normal, sane people ever do kill? What I'm getting at is, there may be a strain of insanity in the family. Oh, for the Lord's sake, Judy, won't you stop pushing the waves all out of your hair?”

“Yes, dear, of course. I was trying to think about this madness. I'm sure that you are mistaken. Aunt Gracia was a mystic. But you must remember how sane and wise she was. There may have been something a bit bleak about her wisdom, but it was deliberate. Father killed the man exactly as he might have killed a rattle-

snake coiled to strike at Mother. But you, Neal, forgive me, don't seem entirely sane to me to-day."

"Convenient insanity?"

"No, no, Neal. Why be cruel? You suggested it; but I did say it stupidly. I should have said that you are quite sane, but that your memory isn't. The whole trouble is merely a question of memory. If you will remember, it is absolutely impossible that you could have killed Father. I don't mean morally impossible—that, too, of course—but physically impossible. Remember. You were locked in your room at the time. Within two minutes after the shot was heard, Lucy came running from her room into yours, through the connecting door, and found you trying to batter down your door, that led into the hall, with a chair."

"Lucy was only a kid at the time. She was much too frightened to know what she saw."

"Not at all, Neal. Lucy was twelve, and unusually precocious."

"Yes, and I was eighteen, and—unusually precocious. I tell you, I did it. But I'm not going to tell even you how I managed it. If the thing should be raked up, and come to a trial, you wouldn't wish to know. And, in the event of a trial, I'd like my little alibi."

"Dear me, Neal! Really, you are talking now like a book; a third-rate detective thing."

"Third rate, nothing of the sort. They are sweeter than the sex stuff, and a pile more interesting. I've been going in for them lately; and pausing to thank my lucky stars that we didn't have a French or a Thorndike at

Q 2 Ranch in 1900. It wouldn't have taken one of those birds long to see through seven doors being locked with ten keys, or the rope from our own attic being swung out of Father's window, or Olympe's being killed the same way Father was——"

"See, Neal, how false your memory is? Olympe was not killed that night. She lived for years after that. Since your memory has begun to play tricks of this sort, why won't you trust our memories—my memory? I know, and all the others know, that there is no possibility of your having had anything to do with Father's murder."

"You weren't there, Judy; so, naturally, you'd remember all about it. Yes, you bet. But that's what I want you to know, just the same. You, and the others. It hasn't mattered much, until Ursula——"

"Marry Ursula, and it won't matter then."

"Chris's duplex psychology?"

"I suppose so. I'm not clever with it. Come home with us this afternoon. Tell Chris what you've told me. He'll straighten it out for you."

"For me—or for Irene?"

"Shame on you, Neal."

"Surely. Sorry. But it has always bothered Chris a lot, you know, having that dapper honour of his sort of uncreased, as it were, by the fact that Irene was out straying around loose in the hall that night when the rest of us were locked up. If you don't mind, that is, a lot, I think I'll ask you not to mention this to Chris—nor to anyone."

"I shouldn't have, in any case."

“Ursula?”

“I think not. Since it is unimportant and false, it couldn’t interest her particularly. I regard it, rather, as a wave you’ve done, or had done, to your memory. You know, exactly like those horrid permanent kinks that Irene had put in her hair a few years ago. It is artificial and false and ugly. But, like the hair kinks, it will grow out straight in time. Until then, the less attention we call to it the better, I should say.”

“I should say so, too; for that reason, or—another.”

“About going home, dear. We had planned to leave shortly after tea, have dinner at that delightful new place on the highway, and spend the night there. Then, with easy driving, we should be at the ranch in time for luncheon to-morrow. Would that suit you?”

“On the square, Judy, I am sick of it here. But, if I go back with you, will you ship Ursula as soon as you can?”

“Yes, Neal. If that seems fair to you, I will.”

“Damn that red hat, Jude. It is the same colour that the mask was. I hate red, anyway.”

“Sorry, but I’m afraid you’ll have to endure it. It cost too much. Will you join us for tea?”

“I think not. Thanks, all that. Did you drive over, or did you bring George?”

“We brought George. He was so avid to show off Irene’s conception of a proper uniform for a chauffeur that I hadn’t the courage to refuse him. He’s a perfect guy in it, Neal; but as happy as Hallelujah.”

“Fine. I’ll ride in front with him, then. Be sure to fix it that way, will you, honey?”

"Yes, I will. Shall we come by for you at half-past five?"

"Wait, Judy, listen. No, I mean really listen. You remember the snow the night Father was killed? Well, if anyone from the outside had done it, there'd have been bound to be footprints——"

"Neal, dear, that was twenty-eight years ago. Need we go over it all, again, right now? I've always believed that, by the time any of you had regained your senses enough to look for footprints, the new-falling snow had covered them."

"It won't go, Jude. The snow had stopped before we heard the shot. We looked within half an hour. The footprints Chris made, going to the barn, were there plain as print in the morning. That is—— Weren't they?"

"So you wrote to me, Neal. In all your letters you made a particular point of the absence of footprints in the snow. Do you think you would have written like that if you'd been trying to hide your own guilt?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything; except that, sometimes, I think I've brooded over this too long. I admit that I do get hazy about it now. Only—— There is this, Judy. If I didn't do it, who did?"

"Well, Neal, I believe that is what we are going to have to find out."

"Golly, Judy, you're the prettiest thing I ever saw when you poke up pert like that."

"You'd be especially fit to look at yourself, dear, if you would shave. Half-past five, then? Good-bye."

No, she could not stop and lean against the wall. She must walk steadily, oblivious of reeling worlds. She

must keep her chin high; she must point her toes out—no, straight in front; she had been mistaught about toes. She must not snatch the hideous, vivid thing from her head and throw it on the elevator's floor. She must—What was that thing? Achieve tranquillity. But how was that possible? What did tranquillity mean?

II

If the taxicab would stop bouncing her up and down through the streaming city she could make up her mind what she must say, or, more important, what she must not say to Dr. Joe. "We are concerned about Neal." No. "Neal, of late, hasn't seemed quite well." No. Neal. Neal. Neal.

The not too tall, very fat man, whose white hair crowned his pink baldness childishly like a daisy wreath, took her shivering hands into a grasp that was tight, and warm, and secure.

She said: "Dr. Joe, I've found Neal. I mean—Neal has been here in the city for the past two days. I mean—Neal."

"Sure, I know, Judy. Here, let me help you with that coat. Too hot in this office for a fur coat. Pretty lining. That's a pretty hat, too. Cheerful, but small—that's the rule for a hat."

Ten twirling minutes later he said: "Look, Judy. What is it you want me to do? I'll drive over to Q 2 for the week-end, and only too glad of an excuse. But Neal will be fit as a fiddle. I guess you know that his trouble is mental, not physical."

"But, Dr. Joe, after all, is there a difference?"

"Hello, there! Been taking up Watson?"

"He is so beautifully utilitarian. Sort of in defence, you know, against Chris's everlasting Freud, and Jung, and the rest."

"Now you let your cousin Christopher alone. He's a good boy. He's getting better all the time. How old is Chris by now?"

"In his late fifties. He doesn't look it."

"He couldn't. He's a Quilter. Judy, here's what I've been thinking. You had that psychiatrist—the Vienna man—at your place for quite a while last year, didn't you?"

"For six weeks. He was a friend of Lucy's, you know. But we weren't positive, then, that anything was really wrong with Neal. So we wouldn't allow Dr. Koreth to hector him. He and Chris had a splendid time together; but, as far as Neal was concerned, Dr. Koreth's visit was useless."

"You can't blame him for that, Judy. I couldn't cut out a man's tonsils if I wasn't allowed to let him know that anything was the matter with him."

"I know. But what could we do? Neal's prejudices are so strong that he never would have submitted to an analysis, nor to any treatments along that line. That is what is going to make it so frightfully difficult now. I—I——"

"Now, now, now, Judy. Keep a stiff upper lip. There's more than one way into the woods—and out of them. That's what I've learned by being an old mutt of a general practitioner for forty-five years. We were talking about a certain Watson just now. Since then I've been

thinking of another one—better known. Sherlock Holmes's Dr. Watson.

"Look. What I believe is that this murder business in 1900 has just plum got the best of Neal. He was eighteen. Adolescence is a tricky time. What I'm betting is, that if we could find out who did kill Dick, and prove it to Neal, he would come through with banners flying. That's common sense, so I guess it is good psychology."

"But——"

"Yes, I know, Judy. But you wait a minute. There's a woman down in 'Frisco, and from what I've read about her I think she's all right. I think she's a good woman; a real nice one. She's a Miss Lynn MacDonald, and she calls herself a crime analyst. Now suppose we could get her to come up to Q 2? Lot of us oldsters are still hanging around who could post her up. Look, Judy. Neal doesn't believe in psychoanalysis, but I'll bet a cooky he believes in Craig Kennedy. Last time I saw him, about three months ago, he was down at Gill's Bookstore buying mystery by the pound like it was bacon.

"Why not have her up to the ranch, Judy? Get her to outline a good case—you know how they do it. Getting evidence, and piling up proofs from here, there, and everywhere. Then give the result to Neal. He'll be satisfied, and behave himself and get married, like he should have done twenty years ago, and have some babies."

"Father was killed twenty-eight years ago last month, Dr. Joe."

"I know it. But, look, how I mean—— In some ways that will make it easier instead of harder."

"You mean imaginary proofs to find an imaginary culprit? No, Dr. Joe, that wouldn't do. It is difficult to understand, but most of the time Neal is the keenest one of the family—the most clear-headed and sensible. These queernesses of his come on in flashes—and are gone. Entirely gone. One moment he will be—well, odd. And, in the next moment, he will be wholly himself again."

"No, that isn't hard to understand, Judy. Most of them—lots of them are like that. We couldn't fool Neal on anything he was sane about. But I think we could fool him on something he is——"

"Finish it, Dr. Joe. Do you think that Neal is actually insane?"

"Look, my girl. We can't say that Neal is sensible on the subject of Dick's death, can we? Jehoshaphat, Judy, I wish we could get him straightened out pretty quick now! Jehoshaphat, but I do!"

"He'll not get better, you think, Dr. Joe?"

"Well, look, Judy. You're asking me. He has been getting steadily worse for two—almost three—years now. Of course, you haven't told me what he said to you to-day. But I've made my living by guessing for the last forty-odd years. Man ought to be a good guesser by that time, if he's ever going to be. So I guess I know what Neal said to-day that sent you up here in the condition you were in when you came. That's what I've been getting at. I want you to bring this Lynn MacDonald woman up to the ranch, and have

her prove to Neal that he didn't murder his own father."

"He didn't, Dr. Joe."

"Bless my soul to glory, Judith Quilter! What are you telling me that for? Telling me like that, I mean?"

"Dr. Koreth had much to say about a faculty called empathy. You know—putting one's self in the place of another. Identifying, I think he called it. That is what Neal has done; has overdone. He has put himself in the place of some other member of the family."

"Talk's cheap. You could never make me believe that. Boy and man, I've known the Quilter family for the last fifty years. Of course, lots of people wouldn't agree with me; but, you know, I think I'm a darn good man. I think I've poked along, slow, and done a lot of good in the world. I think I've led a darn decent life. Most of my goals have been pretty flat, I guess. Most of my Rubicons—ditches, maybe. But what I'm getting at is this: The reason I am any good on earth is because your grandfather, Thaddeus Quilter, took me in hand when I was a lad. It should begin a biography, or be put in a preface, or something. 'I owe——' You know how they do it. Well, he was in the house that night. Do you think that he killed Dick?"

"Dr. Joe!"

"That's the worst blasphemy I ever uttered, Judith. I ask the Lord's and your forgiveness. But, look. Your Aunt Gracia was there that night. Think that she——"

"Dr. Joe!"

"What did I tell you, Judy? It isn't right for you to say what you said. It's damn wicked for you to think

it. It's worse than wicked; it's unhealthy. You'll be getting yourself where Neal is. What makes you think like that, talk like that, my girl?"

"Because—— How well do you remember the details, Dr. Joe?"

"Well enough. Well enough."

"Well enough to remember that the ground was covered with freshly fallen snow, and that no footprints leading away from the house were found that night, or later? That Aunt Gracia and Grandfather, with all the others, searched the house with their thoroughness, all during the night?"

"Yes, yes. I remember that footprint stuff. Fooey, for your footprints! I'm sorry to say it, Judith, but I thought better of you than this. The house at Q 2 is bigger than six barns. Couldn't some damn scoundrel have hidden there, before and after, even if those poor souls, sick with grief and useless from shock and fear and excitement, did search the house, or try to? I don't know what's got hold of you. But it would take more than the absence of footprints to make me, an outsider, doubt a member of your family, or any friend of theirs."

"It would take more than that to make me doubt, too, Dr. Joe."

"You don't say! Look, Judith, you're getting me sore. I'm warning you. By Gad, I wouldn't let another person sit there in my chair and say what you're saying. I'd slap them over!"

"Yes, I'm sure you would, Dr. Joe. But—— No matter. I think that your suggestion about engaging this crime analyst is an excellent one. She was the woman

who got to the bottom of that dreadful Hollywood affair, wasn't she? I remember the name. Only—I'll want the truth from her. Neal, mentally disabled, is so much keener than most mentally sound people that he'd reject a falsity. I know it."

"Like you said just now, Judy, it was all over twenty-eight years ago. Look, we couldn't go to anybody—not to Sherlock Holmes himself—and say, 'There was a murder on the Q 2 Ranch back in 1900. Some few oldsters are living yet who were around at the time and could tell you something about it—what they can remember. The house is still there, though it has been remodelled and refurnished a couple of times. A good many people studied over the case in 1900, but they all had to give it up. People have been studying over it ever since, for that matter; but they can't get any place with it at all. What we want from you, now, is for you to get the thing straightened out as soon as possible, and produce, or anyway name, the guilty wretch or wretches.'"

"Dr. Joe, Greg and I went to Colorado in March, 1900. Lucy, with her passion for writing, wrote long letters to me until late September. Father was killed on the eighth of October. On the tenth of October, Neal took up the letter writing. (I couldn't leave Greg alone, and, of course, I couldn't bring him home to the horror there.)"

"I should say you couldn't. You were a good wife, Judy. Greg was a fine, true husband. But you should have married again—had babies."

"Perhaps. About the letters, Dr. Joe. I have read and

reread them. To me they seem tremendously significant. Significant, maybe, by omission; but significant, nevertheless. This is particularly true of Lucy's letters. Queer things, very queer things began to happen at Q 2 long before Father was killed. The family discord—— But I won't go into that. There were other things. The accident, in which Father narrowly escaped with his life. The absurdity of his baptism——'

"How old was Lucy when she was writing you all this truck?"

"She was twelve years old. Yes, I know—but you must remember that Lucy was a genius, even then. Dr. Koreth said, one evening, that modern criminologists are coming to value the accuracy of children's testimony. From Lucy I may well have what may have been the motivating factor, or factors. From Neal, with a man's intelligence and a boy's honesty and eagerness, I have the results. A day-by-day account, for several weeks, of all the findings, the suspicions, the theories, and—well, the clues.

"Like Lucy and Chris, Neal was a born scribbler. He never had time to give to it, but he loved even the physical act of writing. He began his letters to me with the avowal that he was writing them in order that I might, with the facts placed before me, help him to discover Father's murderer. He thought it was the truth. But the letters show that his real reason for writing to me was to have an outlet for the stuff that was torturing his mind. What I am trying to say, Dr. Joe, and am saying so stupidly, is that Neal gave me, unconsciously, more than a bare recountal of facts.

It seems possible, at least, that a mind trained in criminal analysis could take these letters, and Lucy's, and read the truth from them. I can't decipher the most simple code. But the Rosetta stone has been deciphered."

"Didn't the other folks write you letters during that time, too?"

"None that I kept. They were all troubled at home, and their letters weren't like them. I kept Lucy's because—well, because they were Lucy's, I suppose. At the time, it seemed more loyal to destroy the others. Then, after Father's death, none of them told me the truth—so I destroyed them. But I have Lucy's, and I have Neal's. Three hours ago I wouldn't have given them to a stranger—no, not to a friend—to read for anything in the world. But now——"

"I don't believe you need to, Judy. Look. If we, backed up by this crime analyst, could make believe that something was the truth—why wouldn't that do? No, you won't have it? Well, look, I'm going to have to be pretty mean. I'm going to have to tell you that I think that will be the best we can do. I don't believe anybody, trained analyst or not, could get at the fact of Dick's murder at this late date; not from a packet of letters, twenty-eight years old, written by a couple of kids."

"You wouldn't diagnose the simplest case without seeing the patient. Those letters are here in my safety-deposit vault at the bank. I'm going now and get them and bring them to you. Will you read them? And will you come to Q 2 over the week-end, and tell me what

you think of them? I'd come to the city, but I don't like to leave Neal——”

“Look, Judy. I'd read the complete works of Ouida if you asked me to, and you know it. I've been dying to come to the ranch all fall. I've been kind of bashful, though, hanging back and waiting for an invitation. There, there, never mind about that. Run along, and be a good girl. You'll have to hop to it to make the bank before three——”

“Thank you, Dr. Joe. Thank you, and——”

“You run along now, like I told you, or I'll send you a bill!”

III

Judith watched the fire twisting around the oak logs in the living-room fireplace and wondered why Dr. Joe had created a niece for himself since she had seen him in his office last Wednesday.

Irene, faultlessly blonde, buoyantly obtuse, appeared in the doorway, shook an arch forefinger, chirped, “Oh, you two——” and disappeared.

Dr. Joseph Elm said: “Her legs are too fat. She ought to wear longer skirts. Old lady like her. But, as I was saying, Judy, this niece of mine has been fussing and fussing—you know how it is—to have me come down to 'Frisco to see her. Look, I think I'll go down tomorrow or the next day; and, while I'm there, I might just as well hunt up this Miss MacDonald. Save you a trip down. You can post me up on what to say——”

“You've read the letters, Dr. Joe. What do you think of them?”

"Well, now, Judy—I hardly know."

"But honestly, Dr. Joe?"

"Judy, since you want it, I believe that somebody real smart might get something or other out of the letters. They give a lot of facts, and they seem to give them pretty straight."

"You think, as I think, Dr. Joe, that it must have been one of us?"

"Bless my soul to glory, if I do! Look, Judy. It does seem like whoever did it must have been in the house before—and quite a while afterward. But those were the days of lamps and candles out here on the ranch. Somebody might have hidden in the house for a couple of days—cellar, attic. Anyway, look! What's the sense of amateurs like us tinkering around and worrying over this thing when we can get a professional, a specialist, to take it in hand? I don't examine a man's teeth; I send him to his dentist. Since I'm going to be in 'Frisco anyway, I might as well stop in and make a dicker with this crime analyst. I've been thinking. It might be a good plan to fetch her right up here. She could get the lay of the land then. And while she was studying over the letters she could talk to you and Lucy, and you could answer any questions for her. What do you think?"

"I'd agree, except for Neal. He has been himself since we came home on Thursday. But I am afraid that it wouldn't do to have him know we were delving into the thing again. I'm sure it wouldn't be safe. I fancy, though, considering her profession, that this woman would be willing to come as a friend of Lucy's, or as—your niece."

"Or as a hired girl, something along that line?"

"It would be much easier to explain a guest at Q 2 than it would be to explain a new servant, after all these years of Tilda, and Lily, and George, and Gee Sing."

"Look, Judy. I'll size her up. If she's ornery ordinary, I'll wire you, and you'll have to sandwich her in as help for Tilda or something. If she's just common ordinary, the niece racket would be all right. And if she should happen to be extraordinary, we'll work the friend of Lucy's stunt.

"Never mind. I'll take it you've said it, and thanks. Look, Judy, you don't need to compliment my relatives, though, because I'm going to be pretty mean about one of yours right now. Irene's a doggone chatter-box. And, like most of that kind, she isn't smart enough to show, either. Seems to me it would be better not to let Irene in on this. I don't mean that she's malicious. But she'd spill the beans, sure as fate, some place where Neal would find them."

"I know. But I'm afraid Chris would resent it if we didn't tell her."

"Look. There's no law been passed that we have to tell Chris, either. Did you mean to go tearing the lace off your silly handkerchief, Judy?"

She dropped the nervous fluff into her lap. "This is going to be hard to carry through, Dr. Joe."

"You're right. It is going to be hard. Hard as blazes. Are you sure you want to, my girl?"

"I haven't any choice."

"I hate to say this, Judy; but you know there is a

chance, or half a chance that you, or even Neal, might be partly right about this: that some one of the family——”

“I know. That’s why I think we should tell Chris the truth about this woman, if she comes here. You see, Lucy and I will know who she is.”

“Lucy was a kid. You were in Colorado. Look, Judy. Chris is a good boy, and he’s getting better all the time. But he’s been married to Irene for twenty-odd years—and, bless my soul to glory, he’s been in love with her all the while, and is yet. Tell Chris, and you’ve told Irene.”

“I suppose so.”

“Here’s another thing. If there can be anything comparative about one Quilter’s feelings for another Quilter, I’d say that Neal and Chris were less partial to each other than any other members of the family. It would bust Chris all up to have Neal get worse. But he’d have that happen even before he’d haul what he calls the Quilter honour down from the flagstaff where he keeps it hoisted.”

“I’m not sure; but I believe that isn’t fair to Chris.”

“You bet it is. Look, Judy. It is a matter of taste whether you’d rather have one cousin wind up in a nice, comfortable sanitarium somewhere, or whether you’d rather have it proved that your aunt, or your uncle (by Jolly, Judy, Phineas was a great old boy, wasn’t he! Letters seemed to bring him right back to me), or another cousin, or—yourself, or your wife, maybe, killed a member of the family. I’m for you, Judy. I’m with you to the finish. Always have been.

I'm in love with you, you know. If I wasn't, I'd send you a bill. But yet you can't blame Chris for the stand he'd be bound to take, either."

"No."

"Want to change your mind, my girl? We could drop this thing right here, flat as a pancake."

"Neal is my little brother. I mean—— Well, when I was seven years old, Neal was three. He had fat little legs, and he followed me about wherever I went. I mean—I always did take good care of him. He knew I would. Forgive me, Dr. Joe. I'm naturally sentimental; but you and Neal seem to be the only people who tempt me to display it. All I was trying to say was that I have determined to go through with this. And—I wish I could think of some way to thank you. It seemed almost impossible for either Lucy or me to go to San Francisco just now."

"Going to 'Frisco anyhow. Funny fellow if I couldn't do a little neighbourly errand for a friend."

"I understand about the trip, and the niece."

"Judy, you're flirting with me. Shame on you—an old lady like you!"

"I'm not. I'm adoring you."

"You're darn right. You'd better, or I'd send you a bill."

"Do you think this crime analyst will come up to Q 2, Dr. Joe?"

"Come? She'll jump at the chance."

CHAPTER II

I

DR. JOSEPH ELM said: "Look, Miss MacDonald, I'm not asking you to say whether or not you'll take the case. All I'm asking you to do is to read these letters."

"Letters," Lynn MacDonald explained, "that pertain to a murder committed twenty-eight years ago. Many of them, you have told me, written by a twelve-year-old child. Yes, I admit the fact that the child was Lucy Quilter does make some difference—but not enough. The remainder written by a boy who since has confessed to the murder. At the very best, I could form a theory or two. Any possibility of proving those theories has been removed by time. I am sorry, Dr. Elm, but——"

"Will you read these letters, just read them, I mean, for five hundred dollars?"

"My time——"

"Yes. I know about time. Everybody's time. Will you read them for a thousand dollars?"

"I am not a highway robber, Dr. Elm."

"No? Well, bless my soul to glory if I know what you are. You're a darn good crime analyst, or so I hear. But if you're not a better analyst than you are a

woman, you've nothing to show. Look. As a woman, you're a mess. You haven't any kindness, or patience, or sympathy—not even pity. You haven't any courage—afraid to take a chance. You haven't much of anything but lack of time.”

He settled back patiently in his chair. If he had guessed rightly about that red hair and those clear gray eyes, something was going to happen in half a minute now.

Lynn MacDonald stood, tall, behind her desk.

“Perhaps you are right,” she said. “Certainly you are right about my lack of time. I have no time to sit here and listen to insults from importunate strangers.”

Dr. Elm added to his patience an air of solid permanence.

“Funny thing,” he offered, “about women. Tell them the truth and ninety-nine out of a hundred will think you are insulting them. I kind of figured, maybe you'd be the hundredth. But I see now where I made my mistake. I should have tried to wheedle instead of——”

“Bullying,” supplied Miss MacDonald.

“All right. Look. I've found out one thing you've got—that's a temper. Glad to see it. Makes you a person. You're Scotch-Irish, I judge. Best debtors in the world. Never had a Scotch-Irish bill yet that wasn't paid. Look. You won't read those letters for love or money. Will you read them to pay a debt?

“Hold on. Let me tell you. I'm a professional man, same as you're a professional woman. I've got a consulting room, too. It isn't near as stylish as this one of

yours. One thing, I've had it forty-odd years, and it's kind of worn down some, and rubbed off. Another thing, I don't much favour elegant consulting rooms. Patients likely to get impressed. 'Tisn't a good thing to impress your patients. Many a stomachache has turned into appendicitis just from the patient being ashamed to own up to an ordinary stomach ache in the midst of walnut furniture and Persian rugs. Look. Here's what I'm getting to.

"I've been sitting up there, afternoons, for the past forty years. I've had time and patience, all that while, to listen to women—two thirds of them nervous, hysterical things, poor souls—telling me about their backaches, and their numb spells, and their throbbing heads. Until the last ten years or so about all I could do was to listen, and then pat them on the shoulders, and tell them they were fine, brave girls, and give them some healthy advice, and send them home. About all I can do yet, for that matter. Say psychiatrist to most women and they'll up and act like you did just now when I was trying to tell you something. No. I sit and cluck, like an old hen eating, and listen. I suppose the time I've wasted listening to and pitying your sister-women would aggregate about twenty years. Money doesn't pay for it—if I got paid with money, which I generally don't, because I can't cure them. Thanks might pay, but I've never got thanked—much. ('Old Dr. Elm simply could not find what my trouble was. So I went to young Dr. Sawbones, and he cut it right out. I wouldn't have lived three months without the operation.') But I've kept along. I'll go back, when I leave

here, and sit up there and listen, and cluck, till I die. But I've always kind of thought, maybe, sometime I'd get paid back. I've never asked a favour of a woman in my life, Miss MacDonald. Never even asked a girl to marry me. Well, I'm asking a favour now. You can read these letters in less than the time you could read a novel. How about it? A couple of evenings, as pay for twenty years? And if you tell me there's no reason why you should pay for all the time I've given to your sister-women, I'll tell you that, come to it, there generally isn't a reason for most of the fine, grand things folks have done. Florence Nightingale, Father Damien, or ———"

Lynn MacDonald, sitting behind her desk, resting her chin on her bridging fingers, smiled. "Or," she questioned, "Dr. Joseph Elm?"

"I get you. It's below the belt, all the same."

"But, no, you didn't 'get' me. I meant, any real reason for him to come here and offer me what he has just offered me. Oh, yes. I know what it is. In spite of your opinion of me, I have some of it myself—in payment for a service, not for himself, but for friends of his?"

"Well, of course, if it comes to that, the Quilters have always seemed a lot more like relations than friends."

"I see. Now, then, Dr. Elm, since I am to read the letters, perhaps if you could give me just the outlines of the case? None of the details, but facts enough to allow me to study the letters with some understanding from the beginning?"

"Yes, you bet. That's what I thought, too. If we

could kind of whittle through the thing together, before you began on the letters, it might save you a lot of time."

Miss MacDonald's pink palms met meekly in her lap. Her face was quiet, but the comprehension in her gray eyes was visible.

II

"Here," said Dr. Elm, "we are." He produced a derelict notebook from his pocket, and flicked through it with a dampened forefinger. "Yes. I've made out a list of characters—like in a play——"

"First, if you will," suggested Miss MacDonald, "I'd rather hear, again, the outlines of the case. Where the murder was done, when, and how. Later, perhaps, the people who were on the premises at the time would be helpful. I have understood you to say that Richard Quilter was shot when he was in bed in his room at night. That the absence of a weapon precluded all possibilities of suicide. That a rope was found hanging from his window, out across a porch roof beneath the window, and to the ground. That the freshly fallen snow on the roof and the rope indicated that the rope had not been used as a means for escape. That careful searching of the grounds that night, particularly in front of each window and door, seemed to prove that no one had left the house after the shot was heard."

"That's right, so far; exactly right. Now let me see. Yes, here it is. The time was Monday around midnight, on the eighth of October, in the year 1900. The place

was the Quilters' big cattle ranch, Q 2 Ranch, in Quilter County, eastern Oregon."

"Perhaps," suggested Miss MacDonald, with a last clutch at her dinner engagement, "if you have it all written in the notebook, you might leave it, with the letters?"

Dr. Elm squeezed the book shut and sunk it into his pocket. "You couldn't," he explained, "make heads or tails of that. Let me see. Where was I?"

"Oh, yes. On Monday night, October the eighth, the Quilter family went to bed early, as usual. Irene Quilter, the young bride of Christopher Quilter (Chris was Richard's—Dick's—cousin) couldn't sleep, so she got up about ten o'clock, put on her slippers and her wrapper, took a candle and went downstairs to the sitting room. She lighted the hanging lamp down there, and poked up the fire, and read until a little after eleven o'clock. Then she went back upstairs. When she tried to go into her room and Chris's, she found that the door was locked.

"Now Irene, like most people who haven't much pride, was awfully precious with what she did have. She was too proud to knock. Also, it made her mad all over to think Chris had locked her out. She turned around and sneaked straight downstairs again, and fixed herself a bed, with Indian blankets, on the sofa in the sitting room.

"I judge that the more she thought about it the madder she got. You see, she and Chris had had a little tiff before he went to sleep. She decided that Chris would be ashamed of himself pretty soon—as he would have

been, sure enough, if he'd played such a mean trick on his wife—and come downstairs to find her and to try to make it up. So what does she do but bolt the door to the back stairway—it came down into the sitting room—and go into the front hall and bolt the door to the front stairway. (It comes out in the letters how the Quilters were never much for locking doors. But they had to have bolts on these stairway doors so that they wouldn't blow open and bang in the winter, when they tried to keep the upstairs shut off.) Locking Chris out—showing him two could play at that lock-out game, as she put it—made Irene feel enough better so that she cozied right up in her sofa bed to cry, but, by mistake, she dropped off to sleep. The next thing she knew she heard a revolver shot upstairs. It sounded, everybody said, like a cannon in the quiet of the place.

“She jumped up, lighted her candle, got into her wrapper and slippers, and ran upstairs. When she reached the upper hall, she must have thought everybody had gone crazy, for they were all pounding on their doors, on the inside, and shaking them, and shouting. They were, like I told you a while ago, all locked in their rooms. She ran down the hall toward Chris's and her room. When she came to Dick's room she saw that the door was open and a lamp was lighted in there, so she ran in. She found Dick in bed, shot though the left chest.

“She ran to him. The window was wide open. That wasn't the custom in those days—three inches down from the top—and she said he turned his eyes toward the open window and muttered something that sounded

like 'Got away.' At first Irene was sure he had said 'Got away.' Later, when folks quizzed her, she admitted that he might have said, 'Go away.' But his next words, she declared up and down, were, 'Red mask.'

"She kind of lifted him up—worst thing in the world to do, of course, but Irene was an awfully stupid woman—and then he said the names of his three children: 'Neal, Judith, Lucy.' It was then, Irene said, when she was stooping over him, that she got blood on the front of her wrapper and on her sleeve.

"She thought he wanted the children brought to him; but she didn't like to leave him, and she didn't know what to do. She had it firmly fixed in her mind, in spite of what he had tried to say when he glanced toward the window, that he had shot himself; so she never thought of asking him even one question. She wouldn't. Well, anyway, she finally started to go for Neal and Lucy—Judith wasn't at home—and he spoke out again and said, 'Wait, Father.' He meant his own father, Thaddeus Quilter.

"Irene went back to Dick and he said, clearer this time, putting all his strength into it, 'Bring Father. I must tell him.' He repeated, 'Must tell Father,' and that was the end.

"Sometime, during all of this, it had dawned on her what the trouble in the hall was. I mean, that the family were all locked in their rooms. Right there on Dick's bedside table, under his lamp, she saw a scatter of keys. She put them in her wrapper pocket and ran out and unlocked the doors. All the locks upstairs were the

same; otherwise Irene never would have got the keys sorted out and the doors unlocked, I guess. Lucy's door was opposite Dick's, so Irene unlocked it first. Neal was in Lucy's room. They ran across the hall—Irene had said, 'Your father,' to them—but it was too late. Dick was dead when Lucy reached him. That's the story, as briefly as I can tell it."

"He lived and was conscious for some few minutes after he was shot. How about the position of the bed? Would there have been any possibility that he could have thrown the revolver from him, through the open window?"

"Look. The bed was ten or twelve feet from the window. The gun would have had to land on the porch roof, just beneath the window. The snow on the roof was unbroken. There was nothing on it, or in it, except the rope. The only other gun in the room was on the top shelf of a closet, the length of the room, at least twenty feet, from the bed. It was found fully loaded. Now about the rope——"

"Forgive me, Dr. Elm. You got your details from the letters, didn't you?"

"Yes. Of course I'd heard a lot of talk at the time. I got to Q 2 as fast as I could after they sent me word. I got there early Wednesday morning. But I'd forgotten some, and most of the details I never had any too straight, anyway. I was too busy looking after the family to take the interest I should have, maybe. Anyhow, what I really thought, in spite of heck and high water, was that some dirty cur had got into the house

and killed the boy and got out again—some way or other. It was what I wanted to believe, so I've kept at believing it until—here recently."

"These letters, nothing else, have forced you to change your mind?"

"That's about the size of it, I guess."

"The letters, that is, which recount all the findings of the murder, and which were written by the person who has since confessed to it?"

"Yes. Neal wrote them, thank the Lord. If he hadn't written these letters when he was eighteen, it might be a lot harder for us now when he is forty-six."

"I see. Now, then, if you will, tell me about the people who were in the house at the time. Then, when I begin to read the letters, I can recognize the members of the family, and the others, in their proper relationships."

III

Dr. Elm said: "Miss MacDonald, I've never won any fame for driving a hard bargain, and I don't care about starting to this late in life. You've agreed to read the letters; nothing else. If you say the word, I'll begin right here with descriptions of the family. But, look; you mentioned relationships. There's another relationship that is mighty important. I mean the relationship of the Quilter family, for the past two hundred and some years, to their environment. You can't snatch a parcel of folks away from their backgrounds and then account for the way the folks act. People live in a pattern. Whether the pattern is entirely of their own formation,

or whether it isn't, hasn't much of anything to do with it. The pattern is there—just as sure as it is here in this pretty rug of yours. And, to see folks honestly, you have to see them with relation to their pattern. This is so true that, if you haven't their right pattern, you'll give them another. That's why I quarrel with the Behaviourists.

"Now as soon as you begin to read Lucy's letters you'll begin to wonder. They don't sound like the letters of a little back-country ranch girl. And Neal's don't sound like the letters of a country bumpkin, nor yet of a buckaroo in eastern Oregon in 1900. From start to finish of these letters, you'll be bothered finding the original Quilter pattern. I can give it to you in five minutes, if you'll let me. Will you?"

"But," began Miss MacDonald, and amended a quick, "of course." She refused herself a glance at her wrist watch and repeated, by way of improvement, "But of course."

"Well, then, in 1624 James the First made a big land grant in Virginia to Sir Christopher Quilter—tenth great grandfather, the children call him. You know your American history well enough to know that the fact that Sir Christopher and his wife Delidah stayed right there and succeeded in laying the foundations for a great family estate means something. I could spend all afternoon telling you Quilter history, but I won't. Right from then on it is a history of decent, striving, successful men and women, with heroes scattered thick as fleas on a dog's back. One of the Quilters was a warm personal friend of Washington's—so on.

"In 1848 the original grant, or most of it, was still owned by a Christopher Quilter. He had three sons: Christopher, Thaddeus, and Phineas. When Christopher and Thaddeus had come of age, the old man had given them free leases on plantations of their own—slaves and all. These two lads had been educated at Oxford. That gave them a chance, maybe, to get a perspective on the question of slavery.

"Christopher, the eldest son, was thirty years old in 1848. Thaddeus, the second son, was twenty-eight years old. Phineas, the youngest, was fifteen. He was in England. Well, the two older boys put their heads together and decided to leave the South. They hated slavery, like most decent men did. Also, they hated the sectional differences; and being as smart as some and smarter than most, both of them saw pretty well what was going to happen in the nation, sooner or later.

"They talked it over with their father, of course, and he agreed with them, right down to the ground. He was less of an abolitionist, maybe, than his sons were. But he thought that the South would secede and get away with it—and he hated the idea worse than poison. He'd have come with the boys to the Oregon territory, I think, but for the question of the slaves on the plantation.

"Maybe you've heard about fine, grand abolitionists in the South who freed their slaves and went North? Yes. Look, maybe you've heard, too, about people who moved and left their cats, free as air, to starve. Decent Southerners, in those days, didn't free their slaves and

walk off. No more than a decent father, nowadays, frees his children and walks off.

"No, siree. Great-grandfather Quilter sold the two plantations that his sons had been managing, and gave them the money he got for them. Christopher and Thaddeus took the money, and their wives, and came out to Oregon in 1848. Great-grandfather stayed in Virginia, and took care of the slaves until he died, during the last year of the Civil War.

"Sure, Christopher and Thaddeus came as wealthy men. But I don't need to tell you that they gave up lives of luxury and ease for the hardships of pioneering. They had two reasons. I don't know which loomed larger to them. One was to get clear shed of the wickedness of slavery. The second was to found another family estate in a safe land. Phineas and Thaddeus both fought on the side of the North during the war. When the war was over, they came home to the Q 2 Ranch. And there they've lived and raised their families; and there their children and their children's children are living up to now, 1928. Pretty decent-looking pattern? Nearly as I can judge it's made of material that hasn't any wrong side to it, nor any seams. That is, until this cussed murder business ripped through it in 1900.

"Christopher, the eldest brother, and his wife had both died by that time, and Thaddeus Quilter was the head of the family. He was eighty years old in 1900. Eighty years of the finest, cleanest, most holy-honest living that a man ever put through. He was the father of the murdered boy, Richard Quilter. He was the father of the lady called Aunt Gracia in the letters.

And he was the grandfather of Richard's three children: Neal, Judith, and Lucy. Their grandmother, Thaddeus Quilter's wife, had been dead a good many years.

"Taking them in the order of their ages, Phineas Quilter, the youngest of the three brothers, you know, comes next. He was sixty-seven years old in 1900, and he was a great old boy. He'd spent a good part of his time hunting for gold mines in Oregon and Nevada; he never fared very far, but he fared often. It was his diversion. He was a happy-go-lucky, but good—good as his gold all the way through. He was a cut-up, strong for practical jokes—all like that. A little gay and fizzy in his youth, maybe; but he came out fine and mellow in his old age. His wife called him Pan when she was in a real good humour. He liked it. That gives a slant, maybe. But don't forget that, like Thaddeus Quilter, he was a fine, honourable old gentleman. Phineas loved Dick like he would have loved his own son, if he'd had one.

"Olympe, Phineas's wife, comes next in order of age. She was all right, a real nice lady. Phineas met her when he went South, after the war, to try to settle up the estate. She was what they used to call a reigning beauty. She was studying elocution, and hoping to be a great actress. So Phineas met her, and married her a few weeks later, and brought her out to Oregon to live on a cattle ranch—de luxe, but a frontier ranch, just the same. Nowadays the marriage might have wound up in a divorce court, in spite of the fact that they loved each other a lot, right up to the end. Anyway, Olympe did what women in those days generally did do, she stayed

married, and made the best of it. I can sort of imagine her thinking it over, those first months on the ranch, looking far across the sage and the bunch grass to the hills, and saying to herself something like this: "I wished to be a famous actress. I could have been, too, if I hadn't fallen for this young Lochinvar-came-out-of-the-West stuff. Well, I did. Here I am, stranded on an eastern Oregon cattle ranch. By Jolly, I'll be a great actress anyway." And then she went to it.

"From that day on she used the Q 2 Ranch for her stage, and acted on it, with the family and their friends for her lifelong audience. Now here's the catch in it. This acting business made her seem like more or less of a fool. Yet the whole family loved her and respected her. Folks will give love free, sometimes, but they won't give respect free. Olympe had to earn that. Bless my soul to glory, if I know how she earned it—but she did. She was selfish. She didn't know much about gratitude. She was vain. She slipped up on a lot of the virtues. And yet, I respected her, and I respect her memory. I used to puff all up with pride when she'd deign to be nice to me.

"That covers the oldsters. Did you get them? Thaddeus Quilter, father of the murdered man; Phineas Quilter and his wife Olympe, uncle and aunt of the murdered man?"

"Yes. I have them straight."

"Dick himself would be next of age. Do you want to hear about him?"

"By all means; yes."

"Well, he took after his father, Thaddeus Quilter. Dick was more of a plodder, not quite so brilliant nor

quite so interesting as the old gentleman, maybe, but not dull; not by a long shot. Bone-good, Dick was—a fine, honourable, hard-working lad. He married young, and he loved his wife enough to make her happy. It busted Dick all up when she died. But he didn't brood. He took what energy he might have put into grieving and used it toward being a darn fine father to the three children she'd left him. Dick worshipped his own father—but all the Quilters did that. I'm bound to say that it was Dick, more than the old gentleman, who pulled the Q 2 Ranch through the lean years and kept it from going under. Dick loved Q 2 like a mother. He had to mortgage, but he never sold an acre of it. Not even when young Christopher, Dick's cousin, was spending a small fortune off it, gallivanting around back East and in Europe.

“Gracia Quilter comes next—Dick's sister, the old gentleman's one daughter. She was a healthy, sweet-hearted, normal girl until she got kind of soured because of a mighty unfortunate love affair. Right after that, by cracky, she embarrassed the family a lot by up and joining a new-fangled religious sect that called themselves Siloamites. You never hear anything at all about them any more, but they were pretty strong in Oregon and Idaho and around there for a while. They were all right, a fine class of people. I never knew better folks, anywhere, than the general run of them. A couple of handsome young missionaries came along and caught Gracia on the rebound from this love affair. She was emotional, and something of a mystic—she took after her mamma in that. So she up and joins the church, and

gets baptized and everything. Never did her nor anybody else a mite of harm that I could see. One of the Siloamite tenets was never to thrust their religion on other folks. But the Quilter family, including even the old gentleman, felt pretty sorry about the whole thing."

"Did her religion amount to fanaticism? Did it in any way seem to affect her mind?"

"No, not a bit of it. Not a bit of it. I'm mentioning it because it seems to me to be the one rift in the Quilters' lute. The one thing that any Quilter ever did that all the other Quilters didn't root for. You know, like Chesterton's neighbours, sitting on the fence and shouting 'Hooray!' Something about Chesterton always reminded me a little of Phineas. Great old boys, both of them—though Phineas certainly kept his figure better.

"Well, that brings us to Christopher. He was the elder Christopher's son. Makes him a nephew of Thaddeus Quilter's, and a cousin of Dick's. Chris was the real showy member of the family. Handsome, as ladies used to say, as a Greek god. He took more after his Uncle Phineas than he did after his father. Though instead of dreaming he'd find a gold mine, Chris dreamed he could write plays. I don't know, yet, why he couldn't. He'd had a fine education, here and abroad, and he was real smart. But he couldn't; and he wasted a pile of the family's money trying to. Chris was selfish, and too easily influenced. Still, you'd go far before you'd find a better lad than Chris was. He is a fine man, too; and, as I always say, he's getting better all the time.

"Just like his Uncle Phineas, though, he went and married an Eastern girl who didn't have a mite of

talent for an isolated ranch. Her name, Irene, didn't live up to its Greek meaning. I can't say that I ever liked Irene much; still, there was always something amiable about my dislike for her. She was one of these irritatingly helpmate-ish sort of women. Never knew a stupid woman to marry a real smart man and not try to run him."

"You think, then, that Irene—Mrs. Christopher Quilter—was a stupid woman? And, also, an egotistical woman?"

"Was and is. Look. She, as they say nowadays, goes in for it. She's sort of deliberately arch—if you know what I mean. One of the poor-little-me type. But she has more to show than I have—a couple of fine sons and a sweet little daughter, so I don't know why I should be running her down. She's been a true wife to Chris.

"Judy, Mrs. Judith Quilter Whitefield, Dick's eldest daughter, comes next. She was in Colorado at the time, taking care of her invalid husband. Married only a year——"

"Perhaps, Dr. Elm, to avoid confusion, if we could keep to the people who were at the ranch on the night of the murder?"

"That's right. But here I went and told you all about Phineas, and he wasn't at the ranch the night Dick was murdered, either."

"It doesn't matter. Now, the others?"

"Neal Quilter was next of age. Dick's son. The one who wrote the letters to Judy. The one on whose account we need to get this thing straightened out. He took after his father and grandfather. Bone-good. Smart as a

whip. Never had any real schooling to amount to anything. His grandfather and his Aunt Gracia taught him. The kid was reading Latin better than I could when he was ten years old. When he was eighteen he passed the entrance examinations for Oregon Agricultural College and was graduated from it just two years later, with all the honours. He was keen about writing, always scribbling things at odd minutes. But he couldn't serve two masters, and Q 2 was his passion. His grandfather was his idol; but he loved his father better than most boys do. Chris's sons think a pile of Chris, but it isn't like the way Neal thought of Dick.

"Lucy Quilter, the little girl who wrote the letters, comes next. She was twelve years old at the time, small and dainty, and pretty as a peach—is yet. At twelve she was the bud of what she's bloomed into since. I guess, from what you said, I don't need to tell you what she is now."

"Scarcely. It must be marvellous to know her as you do."

"That's what I think, when I'm away from her. Soon as I get with her I forget that she's a famous lady, and start trying to boss her about her babies, or to advise her about taking care of her health better, or something of the kind. She's as simple as common sense—and as rare. Let me see—Neal, Lucy. Yes, that finishes off the list."

"No servants? No visitors?"

"From 1893 to 1900 were the seven lean years on the Q 2 Ranch. They had a Chinese house boy, Dong Lee. But, aside from him, Gracia and Judy—until she went

away—with Lucy's help were doing all the inside work. Dick and Neal were doing most of the outside work. They had to have help, of course; but they got the neighbouring men to come in when they needed them. So many of the ranches went under in '93 and '94 that help was easy enough to get that way, in those days. But Dong Lee wasn't there the night Dick was killed. He'd been having trouble with his teeth—Dong Lee, that is—and he'd gone to Portland to see a dentist.

"Now as to visitors. Gracia had had a couple of her church friends, missionaries, there on the place for ten days. There was one room built in the attic, and the boys had occupied it. But they'd left the day before. Nice, clean lads, both of them. I always thought it was a lucky thing for them that they were well out of it."

"You are certain that they both had left?"

"Look. Dick was killed on Monday night, around midnight. Late Monday afternoon the two lads were in my office in Portland, a matter of two hundred miles distant (remember we didn't have automobiles in those days), delivering a message from Dick to me. He wanted a prescription refilled and sent to him."

"Was he ill at the time?"

"Yes. Dick had been having a lot of trouble with his stomach."

"Had it made him unpleasant, difficult to live with?"

"It had not. Quieted him down a mite. I think that is an over-exploited theory, about pain making folks mean. If they're naturally mean, it gives them an excuse for indulging. In my experience, I've found that

real suffering is anyway as apt to make a saint as a sinner. But that's beside the point, I guess."

"No, I think not. But about these visitors. I suppose you are certain that the two men who came to your office, with the message, were the same two men who had been visiting at the farm?"

"At the ranch? Yes, dead certain. I'd known the lads before. I knew them afterward. Not a shadow of doubt about it."

"I see. Now, then, Dr. Elm, the situation you have presented to me amounts to this:

"First, you give me stately, unassailable traditions. That is, traditions based on proven performances of integrity, stability, courage, reaching through two hundred years. Then you give me the Quilter family of 1900, true to these traditions—wise, honourable, cultured people, with strong family loyalty and affection. A dearly loved member of this family is found murdered in his room at night. That a member of the Quilter family, which you have presented to me, could be guilty of such a crime seems to be entirely without the bounds of reason.

"But there was newly fallen snow that night. No one could have gone away from the house without leaving footprints in the snow. You declare that there were no footprints. Someone might have hidden in the house, and remained there until escape was possible. One of your first insistences was that, because of the reliability of the people who searched the house, no one could have been hiding there. Also, the house was so carefully

guarded that an escape, after the first hour, would have been impossible.

"Do you see it? You have precluded all possibility that the murder was committed by a member of the Quilter family. You have precluded all possibility that the murder was committed by anyone who was not a member of the Quilter family. And you state that it happened twenty-eight years ago.

"Wait. You are a reasonable, sensible man. Why didn't you tell me, at first, that you didn't expect, nor entirely desire, me to arrive at the truth? That you wanted a sound-seeming theory, which could be evolved from the letters, and which might, by fixing on some guilty stranger, cure your friend of his delusion? I may be able to do that for you. If I can do it, harmlessly, I will. I know, as you know, that I can't do better than that."

"I hate to hear you talk that way, my girl. Quitting before you've begun. I sized you up as having more spunk than that. One thing I admired the most about you was your spunk and——"

"Temper your admiration, Dr. Elm. You aren't in your consulting room just now, you know."

"I don't think that's very nice of you, Miss MacDonald, trying to abash an old, white-haired man like me."

"I only wish that I thought I had, or could. Your methods shame Machiavelli. I'm in terror of you. You've bullied me into reading your letters. You've bullied me into promising a harmless lie. If the harmless lie seems inadequate, you'll doubtless bully me into a pernicious one, and the penitentiary."

Dr. Elm said, "Bless your heart," stood, put his overcoat across his arm, bowed; and, though his two hundred and fifty pounds would seem to necessitate a definite solidity of carriage, Lynn MacDonald was left with the impression that some gentle breeze had wafted him delicately away.

She smiled, the rueful smile of grudging admiration confronting the confusion of charm and guile. She looked at her watch. It was too late to go home and dress and keep her dinner engagement; it was too early for anything else. An hour's reading should take her far through the letters. Then home, and dinner, and the restful evening she had been needing for so long. First, the list of people, again:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Richard Quilter: | the murdered man. |
| 2. Thaddeus Quilter: | Richard's father. |
| 3. Phineas Quilter: | Richard's uncle. |
| 4. Olympe Quilter: | Richard's aunt. Phineas's wife. |
| 5. Gracia Quilter: | Richard's sister. |
| 6. Christopher Quilter: | Richard's cousin. |
| 7. Irene Quilter: | Christopher Quilter's wife. |
| 8. Neal Quilter: | Richard's son. |
| 9. Lucy Quilter: | Richard's daughter. |

Dr. Elm had told her that Phineas Quilter was not at the Q 2 Ranch on the night of the murder. She put a check beside his name, and reached for the smaller packet of letters.

CHAPTER III

I

March 12, 1900.

DEAREST, DEAR JUDY-PUDY: Uncle Phineas's dictum, "Never begin a letter or end a love affair with an apology," has been a hindrance to me in the starting of this letter. Perhaps if I state that Dong Lee has had another toothache, and that Christopher sent us a telegram that came two days after you and Greg left, and that said he had been married the week before and would arrive at Q 2 on Saturday, March ninth, with his wife, you may understand why I have not had time to write to you.

All the preparations were exciting and much fun. Grandfather himself helped me shine the best silver on Friday afternoon. Dong Lee had been compelled to lie down with a bag of hot salt on his face. Aunt Gracia made new curtains for Chris's room, and Olympe put her best cloisonné rose jar on the lowboy. The one drawback was that something so pleasant going to happen made us miss you and Greg more tensely. We couldn't say, once, as we had said the day of the hailstorm and rain after you left, "Thank goodness, Judy and Greg aren't here."

Father and Uncle Phineas met Chris and Irene at the

train with the carriage. Neal had worked hard getting it mended and washed and polished; but, of course, there had been no time to paint it. Bread and Butter were not as dashing as I wished they might be. Though Neal had curried them carefully, they somehow did seem to betray the fact they were generally used for ploughing. I hoped that Irene might not notice it. I fear that she did.

Irene is pretty. Her hair is yellow. Her cheeks are pink, and her eyes are turquoise blue. But, though it is hard to explain, her prettiness seems inexpensive: like the things we don't buy in the shops because, though attractive, we feel sure they won't be durable. I should add that this is not very noticeable except when she is close to Aunt Gracia, and that, even then, Irene's clothes do much to counteract the impression.

Her clothes are very beautiful, and she rustles in them as if she were walking knee-deep in autumn leaves. Her trains make Aunt Gracia's and Olympe's seem like something they just happened to be dragging about behind them. On just one hat she has eight plumes, and she said the shortest one was sixteen inches long.

She was very enthusiastic over all of us, and the place, on Saturday evening. She has a way of expressing appreciation by saying "oo," with rising and falling inflections. Sometimes it sounds as if she were running a scale. She showed all sorts of deference to Grandfather by constantly calling him "sir," and acting humble. I am sure that Grandfather disliked it.

Olympe came downstairs rather late, as she usually does when we have company. She looked beautiful in her old white lace ball gown and with her "Prince of

Wales" magenta plumes in her gray hair. Irene seemed much astonished at Olympe; but then, you know, strangers often do. Olympe was at her best. She lifted her lovely chin (not once all evening did she forget and droop her chin) and told Irene how great artists had painted her portraits. It seems that a great artist once wished to paint Irene's picture, too. It is interesting, I think, to have two beauties in the family at one time. It is a pity that Irene uses so much White Rose perfume that, whenever Olympe stays close to her, Olympe begins to sneeze with hay fever as she usually does only in August. But, excluding that, and a few other things, I think the general exchanged impressions on Saturday evening were all at least moderately favourable. Irene made me happy by saying that I looked like a Reginald Birch child. I was glad to be able to repay her at once, and honestly, by saying that she looked like a Penrhyn Stanlaws lady. But it was not original. She said that so she had often been told.

On Sunday morning, when Father, Chris, and I were showing her about the ranch she said, "But, Booful!" (She calls Chris "Booful" in public. I thought, for some time, that she would spell it "Boofel," or "Boofle," and that it was a joke with perhaps interesting origins. I have since discovered that she means "Beautiful." I should think Chris would abhor it.) "But, Booful!" she said, "I didn't know that your funny farm was a truck farm."

Yes, Judy dear, I quote exactly. I was extremely glad that Grandfather had not come with us to be wounded.

Darling Father, as usual, met the situation superbly.

He explained to her that, during the hard times, it had seemed wise to him to put in enough garden to supply the family table, with perhaps a bit over, for occasional trading at the stores, until the worst pressure was past. He told her, of course, we still had cattle and horses, and that, now, the South African War was raising the cattle prices, so that the stockmen would soon come into their own again. He added that after this he would always have a family garden, however, and a large one.

She said, "It is a large family, isn't it?" She has a syrup-sweet voice; but, somehow, the things she says with it often seem to ruin its timbre.

When I told Aunt Gracia what Irene had said about the family, she asked me why I repeated it. She said, "We are a large family, aren't we, honey-baby?"

"Aunt Gracia," I said, "we are. But we are not a large patch of loco weed that has got a start in the best bunch grass."

Father came in, just then, and when he found I was writing to you he asked me to convey this message. Your last letter, he said, has distressed him. You must spare no expense when it is a question of comfort for Greg. Quilters, he thought, had not yet reached the place where they found it necessary to practise economy on their invalids. He sends you and Greg his dearest love. He will write you, at length, in a few days.

Just overnight, almost, economy has stopped here. Chris insisted on having all the stoves right out and the fireplaces reopened. They eat up wood. He says that before next winter we must have the old furnace repaired. Probably, before next winter he will understand

better. He and Irene brought us all presents from the East. I have no enthusiasm, as yet, for describing them. Perhaps, when you receive yours, my difficulty will be clear to you. I think that Olympe is going to send you the ice-wool fascinator they brought to her. It is beautiful, but Olympe will never wear lavender. It was an experience and a lesson to watch Grandfather being grateful for *Richard Carvel* when he had so desired a Miss Tarbell's new *Life of Lincoln*.

I must run now and help Aunt Gracia with supper. Dear Judy and Greg, I love you so much that when I stand on tiptoes I can touch it in the stars.—LUCY.

II

March 19, 1900.

MY DEAR, SWEET SISTER JUDY: This morning I found out an amazing thing. Did you know that Q 2 Ranch belonged entirely to Christopher? Neal says that he had known it, but that it was so unimportant he had forgotten it. I had never thought about who owned it. If I had, I should have supposed that we all did. But to-day I happened to hear Irene say to Chris, "But, Booful, the farm belongs entirely to you." She seemed to be wishing him to do something, I don't know what, about the ranch.

I went at once to Grandfather. I suppose that no one could question the assertion that Grandfather has one of the most beautiful characters that ever was in the world. No matter what great man I read about from Da Vinci to McKinley, I always decide that Grandfather is

superior to him. Sometimes I wonder whether any of us are grateful enough for the opportunity of having Grandfather for an ancestor.

To-day, though I interrupted him when he was deep in his new translation of Schiller, he treated me with kingly courtesy. That is not an exact description. Grandfather, I think, is much more of a gentleman than are most kings.

"Grandfather," I said, respecting his liking for directness in all things, "does Q 2 Ranch belong to Cousin Christopher?"

"It does," he replied. And then, I suppose, he read my feeling in my face, for he asked, quickly, "But, my darling, need that trouble you?"

I told him that if it did not trouble him it would not trouble me; but that I should like to understand about it.

He placed a chair for me. He explained that, since Cousin Christopher had been Uncle Christopher's eldest son, naturally he would inherit the estate. He said that when he and Uncle Christopher, and, later, Uncle Phineas, had founded this second family estate they had agreed that divisions were unwise. So, though both Grandfather and Uncle Phineas had put their fortunes into the ranch, they had desired it to be inherited, though not entailed, as the estates in England are. He explained to me why that is the wisest way. I am sure you know about that; so I shan't bother you with a repetition. Grandfather also said that, of course, mine and thine never had, and never could, mean anything to the Quilter family.

We have often heard that. I suppose we have always believed it. At any rate, I stopped questioning Grandfather and went and looked up the word "bounty" in the dictionary. It meant what I had thought. So, when Aunt Gracia and I were ironing, I asked her why if *meum* and *teum* really meant nothing to a Quilter, it could be true that we had been living on Christopher's bounty all these years.

She seemed shocked, but controlledly so, and said what a very funny baby I was, and where had I managed to pick up so mad an idea.

I told her Irene had said to Chris that, after all, the "farm" belonged to him, and that all these people had been living on his bounty for years and years.

Aunt Gracia said that, of course, I had to do what seemed best to me; but that she was sorry my ideas of rectitude, and of being Grandfather's granddaughter, seemed to allow me to eavesdrop. She finished ironing one of Irene's beautiful corset covers, trimmed with yards of lace ruffling, before she said another word. I ironed plain pillow shams in silent humiliation. Oddly, the next thing she said was, "What did Christopher say?"

"He called her a delightful little imbecile," I said, "and that ended the conversation."

"Necessarily, one would think," Aunt Gracia smiled. But I explained that they stopped conversing in order to begin kissing. They kiss constantly. Uncle Phineas says that is entirely good form for honeymoons. Perhaps he is joking. It seems strange. You and Greg didn't. At least, not lavishly and in public.

Olympe came into the kitchen to see whether her second-best taffeta petticoat had split from being laundered. (It had.)

Aunt Gracia said, "Olympe, dear, why do some women like to be called imbeciles?"

"Because they are," Olympe answered. "It is an acid test. However, if that young person doesn't stop calling me Aunt Olympe, I shall find something to call her that won't please her."

We have told Irene that Olympe objects to the "Aunt," but Irene says she can't remember. I think Olympe and Irene do not love each other, as yet. I believe I haven't told you of an odd mannerism of Irene's. She talks all the time—incessantly is the exact word. It is particularly hard for Olympe. Since all the rest of the family are so busy—Chris has pitched right in and is helping Father and Neal with the ranch work—it leaves only Olympe for Irene to talk to. We could say now, though we do not, how fortunate it is that Greg is not here. Olympe does not have to sit quietly in a chair. She can walk away. She often does.

Your letter telling of Greg's improvement brought us all bright joy. I love you so much that if it were planted as a clover seed it would grow as a meadow.—
LUCY.

III

March 26, 1900.

DEAREST, DEAREST JUDITH: You asked me in your letter that came last Monday to write to you more about Grandfather. Grandfather, of late, has spent more time

than usual in his room, and has been more subdued. There seemed to be not much to write about him. So, after I had read your letter, I decided to have a talk with him in order to gather material for my next letter to you.

Olympe—this is not changing the subject—has developed deafness. As you know, she has been very slightly deaf for some time; but, of late, she pretends to be totally deaf. I say pretends, because she is deaf only when she is with Irene. My problem was: is that wise of Olympe, or is it wrong?

For several months I have felt that it would be beneficial for me to discuss the question of right and wrong, again, with Grandfather. Last year, when I wished to discuss it, he gave me a rule of conduct, you know, "Search for beauty," and said we would better postpone the other for a while.

Yesterday, then, after a quick ride with Neal over the south range (Neal was so adorable. He let me ride Tuesday's Child for the first time, and took Thursday's Child for himself), to pink my cheeks as Grandfather likes to see them, I went and rapped on his door.

I suppose a man would have to be as great as Grandfather is to be able to make other, quite unimportant, people feel almost great themselves when they enter his presence.

I gave my problem to him. He laughed very heartily and then said that, according to Hume, whom he had been reading when I came in, Olympe was justified. Hume, he told me, was an Eighteenth Century historian and philosopher—a better philosopher than historian—

who held that utility was the chief element of all virtue.

"You see," he explained, "according to this gentleman, Olympe's act, since it is so useful, could not be wrong."

Disappointingly, with that he changed the subject and began to talk about loyalty. It was all interesting, as related by Grandfather; but, since it was mostly the same history of the Quilter family, and their courage and loyalty since the time of Cromwell, you would not care to have me repeat it here. Grandfather, of course, knew that I had heard it many times before, and explained that he was using it to make his point—since Irene was now a Quilter we owed loyalty to her.

"Then," I questioned, "if you didn't laugh, you'd really think it was wrong of Olympe to pretend to be deaf?"

Again Grandfather disappointed me by saying that I was a bit young to penetrate Hume.

I picked up my notebook and started to go away. Grandfather asked me what I had there. I told him I had brought my notebook to write in it what he would tell me about right and wrong. He asked me what I had written. I had not written anything. He was troubled. I hurried to explain that it did not matter. He was still troubled. I suggested that it might be wise for me to ask Aunt Gracia about right and wrong. She has them both so neatly.

Grandfather said, "Heaven forbid." And, again, he said that I was too young to be delving into moral issues. He said, perhaps, I would allow him to write a few sim-

ple rules of conduct in my notebook for me to use until I was older. He took my book and wrote:

"Darling little Lucy Quilter. Be proud. Be loyal. Be gay. Be generous rather than just."

After I left Grandfather's room I met Uncle Phineas and Irene in the hall. She had been talking to him. She went away. I said to Uncle Phineas, because Irene had looked so pink and blue and gold, "How lovely she is!"

He pulled my top curl and made up a face at me.

"I mean," I explained, feeling that lovely had been a little extravagant—you know, one would call Aunt Gracia lovely, "how pretty, how delicate."

"Yes," Uncle Phineas said, "pretty and delicate as a somersault." Uncle Phineas does not like Irene at all.

I told him then, since I thought he should know, what Grandfather had been telling me about our owing Irene our loyalty. How family loyalty was one of our strongest traditions. Uncle Phineas said: "Thad goes about brandishing Quilter loyalty like a club." You may imagine what a terrible humour Uncle Phineas must have been in to criticize Grandfather.

Later that evening, when I was showing Neal my new rules of conduct, Uncle Phineas came up. Neal showed them to him, after asking my permission, which it seemed rude to withhold.

Uncle Phineas said he would give me one more. He took my notebook, and wrote, scrawlingly, right under Grandfather's beautiful, patient lettering: "Be wise. Use Wisdom's Robertine." That, as you may not know, is a cosmetic which comes in dark blue glass bottles. Irene has one, and she gave one to Olympe. I thought it

generous of her. Neal says that Irene will never miss one bottle.

It is difficult to explain, but here of late, hatefulness seems to have got hold of all of us. I should say, all of us except Grandfather, who is too perfect, and Father, who is too busy. Darling Father, not busy, wouldn't be hateful, either, I am sure. But the thought of work as a producer of virtue has given me an idea for a story. I have put it in my notebook, and shall write it when I am grown up. It is to be about two men; one who has all the virtues, and one who has none of them, but who is egotistic and avaricious. He has to work so hard to satisfy his vanity and his avarice, and he has to do such good things to get the glory and admiration he wants, that he leads as virtuous a life as does the good man. When they both die, they are regarded with equal respect by their neighbours. *Two Roads* would be the title for it.

As I finished writing that last paragraph, Neal came in. I told him that I had come to the end of my letter, but that I was trying to think of some extra special way to express my love for you and Greg. I asked him how he liked, "I love you so much that, just from what spills over, I love the whole world." He evaded, and teased, and said he did not want to be loved from leakage, and so on. But, finally, though he was very sweet, he reminded me of Grandfather's rule about simplicity, and he said that it seemed to him that love, more than anything else, should be simply expressed. I suppose he is right. So, I love you. I love Greg.—LUCY.

CHAPTER IV

I

April 12, 1900.

DEAREST, DEAREST JUDY-PUDY: "Begin at the beginning," like many other rules, seems very simple. It is not. How is one to know where the beginning is?

I have decided that, probably, the beginning of this very long letter, which I am planning to write to you this afternoon and evening, should be that Irene does not like Q 2 Ranch. She does not wish to live here, or to have Christopher live here.

When they came last month, they came only for a visit. But when Chris found that we had been sending him all the ready money we could get, and had been forced to practise rigid economy, he refused to take Irene back to New York. Father agrees with Chris that he and Irene should stay here for the present.

Chris says certainly, that nothing else is to be considered. He says if he had had the least notion of how things were with us here at home, he would have come home two years ago when he returned from the Continent. He said that, of course, by staying in New York and attempting to get his play produced, he felt that he was doing his share. Because, if *Gold* had been success-

ful, we never would have had another money worry again. He says effort must weigh, as well as accomplishment.

Irene said that Booful had worked very hard and lived most frugally in New York. Chris said that he had not lived half as frugally as he would have had he known that his living was literally coming out of our pantry and off our backs.

Irene and Father both said "Nonsense" to that, but they said it differently. Just the same, Judy, in spite of Father's "Nonsense," can you ever remember a time when about all the ready money we had did not have to be sent off to Cousin Christopher?

Chris said that he had had his chance, and that you had not had yours (he meant about your not going to a university), but that now we must all pull together to see that Neal and I had ours.

Father agreed with him. He rather overagreed with him. He said that Chris had had a bit more than his chance, he thought. That he had two degrees, and two years of European travel. He said that Chris was a sophomore at Princeton when he was Neal's age.

Neal began to say, as he always says, that he did not care for a classical education; that all he needed was a few years at a good agricultural college. Father spoke almost abruptly to him. Neal walked right away out of the room.

When Neal was gone, that left Grandfather, Father, Chris, Irene, and me in the sitting room. I was reading in the window nook. I think that the others did not know I was there. I was not eavesdropping because, if

any of them had turned around and looked at me, I was plainly there to be seen.

Irene said that if an agricultural college was all Neal cared about, why couldn't he be sent to the Oregon one, which she had heard was fairly possible.

Darling Father has been having that stomach trouble again. You know how quiet and patient it makes him. He just sat there, white, and did not answer Irene at all.

Grandfather told her that, just now, even the state agricultural college was a bit more than we could manage.

Irene said, "Couldn't you mortgage some more of Chris's land?"

Grandfather explained to her that the ranch was over-mortgaged now. He went on and told her about how bad ranching conditions had been, and how in 1895 cows were selling for from five to seven dollars, and calves for two, and horses about the same. He told how it had been necessary to disperse most of the herds because we could not afford to keep them. And then he told how timber and teams had kept us going. And how, after that, the mortgages had been necessary to buy new herds, and to pay debts contracted when we couldn't even mortgage. He finished by telling her how, if we could devote the coming two or three years to keeping up our interest, and our herds, and so on, we were bound to win through with flying colours.

I don't know why that should have made Irene angry. It did. It made her so angry that her voice trembled as she asked Grandfather whether he actually meant that

the place was so deeply in debt that no more money could be raised on it.

Grandfather told her that he doubted whether another hundred dollars could be borrowed on the place. He said that now it need not be borrowed. He said she had spoken of raising money. We were now, he told her, engaged in raising money—cattle and horses.

She has a queer way, I think I may have mentioned it before, of seeming to hear only a part, the first part of whatever one says to her. She has another odd mannerism. She interrupts. She interrupted Grandfather then, and said that, in other words, the place was worthless.

Grandfather said to Christopher, "Sir, can you explain to me how your wife happens to be labouring under such a misconception?"

Usually, when anybody asks Christopher a question, Irene answers it. "I know," she said, "that when a farm of this size is mortgaged up to the hilt, so that not even a hundred dollars can be raised on it, that it is a failure. I don't believe in throwing good money after bad. It seems to me that the only thing to do is to sell the place, if possible, and invest the money more wisely."

Judy, did you ever consider how much worse things words can say than people can ever do? I think that must be because actions can be met with actions, but some words have no words for answers.

For quite a long time no one said anything. I felt my heart drop into my stomach, and then—I actually could feel this—my stomach closed around it somewhat as a sea anemone closes—and stuck to it. It was painful.

"Uncle Thaddeus, Dick," Christopher managed to say, "Irene doesn't understand."

Grandfather stood up. He looked majestic. "That, Christopher," he said, "is, I think, your fault and not your wife's. You should have explained to her that men do not sell their inheritance. That it is not theirs to sell."

Grandfather and Father went out of the room together.

Christopher said to Irene, "Uncle Thaddeus is right, sweetheart. It is my fault. I should have explained——"

"Explain!" she burst out. "If there is anything in the world that you haven't explained to me concerning Quilter precedents and traditions, I hope I may never have to hear it. You go about, every one of you, buttered with precedent, greased with traditions. Like the pig at the circus. One tries to get hold of you, and traditions slip you through one's hands. What I need to have explained now is why a farm, admittedly worthless, should be kept as a home for the aged and infirm. We could better afford to put them all into institutions for indigent old age. As for the younger generation, your cousins are strong and capable—let them earn their livings elsewhere. Why should we keep them with our lives? Them, and their children, and——"

I made a dreadful sound. It was like the first part of an enormous hiccup. It was drawing my breath in after smothering for so long.

Christopher turned and saw me. He was glad, I think, to have me there to vent his wrath upon. He lowered his voice and became aggressively polite—you know the way Quilter men do when they are angry. He

begged my pardon for intruding on my privacy, and so on; and, at last, he said that he was bound to ask for my promise that I would not repeat a syllable of what I had, surely inadvertently, overheard.

Irene said bother promising anything. She said I might run and tell every word she'd said, for all she cared. She said she wished I would, and save her the trouble; because, if I didn't, she meant to.

Christopher, looking exactly like the man in the Gibson picture, "Hearts Are Trumps," said, "No, I think not, Irene."

"I have already," she declared, like a dare. "Long ago, I spoke to your Uncle Phineas about the possibility of selling the farm. I've mentioned it, since, to your Aunt Olympe and your Cousin Gracia."

Perhaps if Irene knew it was like cracking us on our crazy bones every time she said "farm," she might stop it. Perhaps she might not.

"I am sorry to hear that, Irene," Christopher said, very much in Grandfather's manner. "Because such talk succeeds only in making my family dislike and distrust you, and accomplishes no other end whatever. Possibility of my selling Q 2 Ranch ranks, in the range of possibilities, exactly on a par with my selling one of the children, or committing a murder or a robbery—something of the sort."

"You are robbing," Irene declared. "You are robbing us of our chance for happiness. Not murder, perhaps. But you are condemning yourself and your wife to a sort of everlasting suicide. You prefer that, I suppose, to——"

"Infinitely," Christopher interrupted (he got the habit from Irene, I think). "But that must be said for you alone, Irene. I love Q 2: I haven't been as loyal to it as the others have been; but I love it, and them. If you would give me a chance, I could be very happy here."

"Pleasant," Irene said, "and interesting to hear you, after we have been married seven weeks, talking about me alone. Dividing us. Leaving me alone, while you step to the other side with your precious family."

"If there is a division," Christopher said—I am sure that they had both forgotten all about me—"you are making it."

"No," she said. "Not yet. But understand this, Christopher, I will not plan a life here—not even with you."

At that moment Olympe came into the room. She has been wearing all her silk petticoats for everyday, since Irene came, so she rustles almost as crisply as Irene does. She was well into the room, she had come down the back stairway, before she noticed us near the fireplace. I was crying. Irene looked as if she were burning, and Christopher looked like her ashes—gray-white.

Irene flamed out at Olympe: "I was telling Christopher that I will not stay here in this hole. That, if he plans to live the remainder of his life here, he will plan to live it without me."

Think, Judy, what a wonderful opportunity it would have been for Olympe's "Quilter men" speech, the one she does like gray velvet, or even her "God help the Quilter wives" speech. But she remained stone deaf. She came to me, and put her arm around my shoulders,

and said, "Come with Olympe, sweetheart," and gave me one of her exquisite handkerchiefs and led me out of the room.

We met Uncle Phineas and Aunt Gracia. Uncle Phineas, of course, began to hug and kiss me and quote the Queen: "Consider what o'clock it is! Consider anything, only don't cry!" Aunt Gracia tried to get me away from Uncle Phineas to find out whether I'd been bumped or burned, and everyone was all excited and concerned as they always are when I cry. I wish they wouldn't do that way. I wish I might indulge more often in the luxury of tears. It should be, I think, one of the recompenses for the length of time one has to be a child. Neal says they fuss so because I open my mouth so wide and make such a noise. I can't help it. I believe no one can be heartbroken and fastidious at the same time.

Olympe was very angry. She said a great deal. Among other things she said that Q 2 was no longer a fit place for a child, and that I had been forced to witness a disgusting scene, and that Irene was threatening to leave Christopher.

Uncle Phineas said: "Hoop-la! That's the best news I've heard since McKinley beat Bryan."

Olympe said, "Pan!"

After supper Irene apologized to Grandfather before all of us. She said that she had not understood about Q 2, but that now Christopher had made things plain to her. Of course, she went on to say, she had never intended that the entire "farm" be sold. Her idea had been to sell small sections of it, here and there; just

enough to supply us with what money we needed for the present.

Uncle Phineas told the story about the man who loved his dog so much that, when he had to cut his tail off, he chopped it in small chunks, so as not to hurt the poor creature so much. Aunt Gracia suggested that we go into the back parlour and have some music.

Uncle Phineas played and Irene sang some of the new coon songs she brought from the East. Then Irene and Christopher did a queer new dance that is called a "Cake-walk." They say it is much more effective when there are several couples. Aunt Gracia sang for the rest of us. While she was singing Irene sat by me and talked.

She told me about the new moving photography. She says every face is recognizable, and that every motion is made. I should love to see it; but, probably, they will never have it in Oregon. She told me, too, that she and Christopher had seen several of the new horseless carriages in New York. She says it is positively eerie to see them gliding along by themselves. No one here, except Grandfather, thinks that they will ever be more than a fad; but Grandfather predicts that, in time, they will at least share equal honours with the horse.

I love you, dear, and I love Greg.—LUCY.

CHAPTER V

I

May 1, 1900.

DEAREST JUDY: Neal says that when you say for me not to write anything about people unless I can write good things about them you are displaying the worst sort of Quilter sentimentality. Uncle Phineas says that your dictum would deplete the libraries. He says to tell you that, if you don't know your Plato, you should know your Boswell and your Pepys. But Grandfather says that the whole secret of the art of letter writing lies in writing not what one wishes to chronicle, but what the recipient can find delight in reading. So, I shall try to write only good things about everyone in your letters. Just now that may be difficult. It can't be helped. And, if you should change your mind, after having Neal's and Uncle Phineas's opinions, please let me know.

You ask what has happened to my lessons. It was necessary to discontinue them for a while, after Chris and Irene came home. Aunt Gracia was too busy to hear them. But now I am having them every day with Chris. And, of course, my Latin twice a week with Grandfather, and my music and French with Olympe.

Chris has time now for my lessons. He has stopped

helping Father and Neal with the ranch work and has begun his writing again. He was no real help, anyway, to Father and Neal. And, when he writes, there is always a possibility that he may make a great deal of money and also achieve fame. He has begun a new play and has the cast of characters all made out. The leading man's rôle is to be for Nat Goodwin.

Irene is happier now that Christopher stays in the house all the time with her. We have tried to get her to ride with us, but she is afraid even of Wednesday's Child. She says she would not be afraid to ride in a ladies' phaëton, if we had one. She has sent to New York for some of her household things that she left there. When they come she is going to fix up her room and Chris's so that it can be called a studio.

Yesterday was Olympe's sixty-first birthday. We had dinner in the evening and a celebration. Olympe sat in Grandfather's chair at the head of the table, and remembered her chin, and was superb. Especially superb when everyone stood and drank her toast with the table claret we had left over from your wedding. Dong Lee baked a triumph of a cake, and we put one tall wax taper in its centre. (White wax tapers always remind me of Aunt Gracia.) I wish we might celebrate for Olympe several times each year. She is so transcendent when she is happy. Even Irene said, last night, that Olympe was not unlike Sarah Bernhardt. We missed you and Greg so much that not one of us mentioned either of you all evening.

I fear that what you suggest about my sense of humour may be just. It has often troubled me. But

Grandfather says humour is a faculty which develops late. He says one should not blame me for not having a fully developed sense of humour, unless one is willing to blame me for not having a fully developed stature. He says that my sense of humour is coming on nicely; that I have a sense of wit and a sense of the ludicrous, and that the more subtle sense will develop as I develop. I hope it is true. But I know that Grandfather is inclined to overrate my abilities. Irene says he greatly overrates them. She has a little girl friend, only fourteen years old, who is a reporter on one of the big New York daily papers. Grandfather said that he presumed the child was an orphan. Irene said no indeed she was not. Are orphans supposed to be brighter than other children?

Dear sister, I send very much love to you and Greg.—LUCY.

II

May 30, 1900.

DEAREST JUDY DEAR: I am glad that you have given me some leeway about writing. Until your letter came, it seemed impossible for me to write at all.

It is Uncle Phineas's fault. He wishes to join the new gold rush to Nome, Alaska, and he is trying to get Chris to go with him. Uncle Phineas, while he doesn't seem old, is edging close to seventy. Chris has had no training for hardships, and would not know a gold mine from a gopher hole. We could not raise money anywhere for them to go properly equipped. If we could, according to the warnings in the newspapers, the expedition would

be, as Grandfather says, criminal folly. (Of course, all I have been writing about this is gleanings from the elders.) The *Oregonian*, a few days ago, had an account of the dreadful dangers and hardships that gold seekers are having to endure. But, in spite of everything, Uncle Phineas and Chris forge right ahead with their plans. It makes one think that Aunt Gracia is right about the childishness of men—though Grandfather and darling Father would have to be the exceptions that prove that rule.

Olympe is wearing her dreariest gowns and is more tragic than I have ever seen her. She has added ever so many clauses to her Quilter men speech (none of them pleasant), and has revised the Quilter wives' speech until it is almost heartbreaking. But Irene has reformed. She offers quite often to dust the rooms. She reads Elbert Hubbard, and Neal says that she is conspicuously living, loving, laughing, and doing things worth while. That seems well enough to me. Neal says that it is wormy. Everything is wormy for Neal, lately. It is an unpleasant new word of his. Marriage, he says, is wormy. He has resolved never to marry. Even love, he says, is wormy. He says it does to men what barnacles do to ships. He says to look at what a fine, free-sailing craft Chris was, before Irene barnacled him all over with her messy love. Neal is growing cynical and pessimistic. Grandfather says it doesn't matter; it is an unavoidable phase of male adolescence.

Some of Irene's household things have come. She has not unpacked them yet, as she doesn't care to have the room called a studio if Chris goes to Nome. Possibly,

then, she would like a *boudoir*. (She has been asking me how to spell French and Latin words for her, when she writes to her friends. I have told her for weeks. But, after thinking it over, I decided, one day, it would be kinder to tell her what Grandfather said about using foreign words in one's letters. She cried, and told Chris that I had said she was vulgar. I had not. I apologized, though, to please her. I didn't mind at all.) She has unpacked some of her linen, to put it in the blue closet so it won't turn yellow. It is not as handsome as our best linen, but better than our third best and much more fancy. She has big initials embroidered on it. The initial is "B." I asked her why, since I had thought her name had been Irene Guildersen.

She was much astonished to discover that the others had not told me Christopher was her second husband. She seemed proud of it. She told me very admirable things about her first husband, who is still living. She divorced him.

Later, when discussing the matter with members of the family, I found that all of them, except Aunt Gracia, approve of divorce and think there is nothing even odd about it if, they said, it was procured because of genuine provocation. These opinions of theirs make it hard for me to understand why none of them had told me about Irene's divorce. Sometimes, though rarely, I agree with Neal, who is declaring, of late, that there is no accounting for Quilters.

I love you dearly. I love Greg dearly, too.—Lucy.

CHAPTER VI

I

June 9, 1900.

DEAREST JUDY-PUDY: Dr. Joe came out last Thursday to see Father and, as Neal says, to sit and worship at Grandfather's feet. Neal himself worships Grandfather, you know. That is why it makes him angry for anyone else to do so. I made an epigram about it: "Gods are not jealous. It is people who are jealous of them." Grandfather says it is creditable for a twelve-year-old.

I love Dr. Joe. I think if he couldn't dispense any medicine he would still be a splendid doctor. When he steps in, and smiles, everything always seems to improve. He told Uncle Phineas there was no possibility that, with his blood pressure, he could survive the hardships of Nome. So that worry is off our minds. Chris has decided to finish his play. He has it well in hand, and the cast of characters all written.

On Saturday, Uncle Phineas started off on a prospecting trip by himself. It was a blow to us, because we had hoped that Uncle Phineas had given over prospecting with that last unfortunate trip of his in 1897. But he was so offended about his blood pressure that he drew thirty dollars from the bank and went down into Mal-

heur County. (Irene thinks it odd that the checking account at the bank is a joint one for all the elders. She said so.)

Irene has stopped living, loving, laughing, and doing things worth while. She broke a Spode cup on Friday. Aunt Gracia cried. Irene said such a fuss over a cup, when Haviland was prettier, and one of the Portland department stores had advertised a sale of Haviland china cups and saucers for eight cents each only last week. She said for Aunt Gracia to dry her tears and she would send ninety-six cents and get a dozen. Doesn't it seem strange that anyone, even Irene, should not comprehend real Spode? It must mean that her backgrounds are murky.

Something of the sort would need to be the matter with a person who could do what Irene did yesterday. She asked Olympe to give her and Christopher the room that is Uncle Phineas's and Olympe's. Olympe was so amazed that she forgot to be deaf. Besides being amazed she was angry, and scornful, and amused, and several other feelings. She, herself, did not seem to have her emotions well sorted.

Aunt Gracia asked Olympe what answer she had given to Irene.

Olympe replied that she had told Irene it seemed to her that Grandfather's room was, perhaps, even more attractive; and that, since Grandfather had had his longer, he was, doubtless, more tired of it than she and Pan were of their room. She suggested that Irene offer to exchange rooms with Grandfather.

Aunt Gracia put down the chopping bowl and went

running right out of the kitchen. When she came back she, too, was angry and laughing. She said she had caught Irene on her way to Grandfather's room.

Olympe shrugged, in that sophisticated foreign manner of hers, which Neal so derides, and asked why Aunt Gracia had stopped her. It was time, Olympe declared, that Grandfather was beginning to see that young person in her true colours.

It is odd about words, isn't it, dear? Now "young," by itself, is a pleasant word; and "person," though lacking in charm, is surely respectable and blameless. But by putting the two words together as Olympe does, they make an insult. Neal says so it is with people. He says, take a pleasant girl and a respectable and blameless man, and marry them and, likely as not, the result will be a joke, or an insult, or even a curse or a crime. But, as I have told you, Neal is developing into a regular Timon.

Olympe asked how Aunt Gracia had managed to halt Irene. Aunt Gracia answered cryptically (this is the exact word because I have just looked it up in the dictionary), "Blackmail."

Olympe laughed one of those ruffling lacy laughs of hers and went away, because the kitchen was steamy and unpleasant. I do not know whether she understood what Aunt Gracia meant by blackmail. I understood. Aunt Gracia did not know that I understood.

Irene, you, see, had told me all about it. Her first husband, whose name is Archie Biggil (isn't that too bad?) was still madly, devotedly, ardently, tenderly in love with her. He is an importer, and had been in Brazil when she had married Chris. Now he has returned to

New York. He has found out about Irene's second marriage, and where she is living. He is writing her passionate letters. There is much more to it than that; but nothing, I think, that you would care to hear. Irene was worried for fear Chris would find out about her receiving the passionate letters. She told me because she had to tell someone. I don't know why she told Aunt Gracia. I trust that Chris will not find out about the letters. I feel certain they would annoy him. He acts, lately, as if he were as much annoyed as a man could be and remain in health. I think he was disappointed about Nome and the gold mine.

I love you and Greg very dearly.—Lucy.

II

June 25, 1900.

DEAREST, DEAR JUDY: I thought it very sweet of you to be sorry for Irene, and to have her remind you of Ruth, sick for home, standing in tears among the alien corn. Neal does not agree with me. He says misplaced sympathy is the trademark of the sentimentalist, and that anyone who could be sorry for Irene here, on Q 2 Ranch, would be sorry for the Black Hole of Calcutta because it had to have all those people packed into it. I am giving you Neal's opinion, not because I think it is very smart, but because I fear it is true.

I believe, if you really feel like being sorry for anyone in particular now, it would be wise to be sorry for Christopher because he is the only one here who deeply loves Irene. Not loving, and not being loved, does give

one such a satisfactory removed feeling. You know, we were so miserable when we thought Whatof was killing the chickens; but when we found that it was a coyote and not Whatof, nearly all of the heavy, hurting feeling went away. I suppose, though, if we were to think that through, as Grandfather always advises, we should discover that it made no difference to the chickens, the real sufferers in the event, whether they were killed by a dog or a coyote. To carry out the analogy, we on the Q 2 Ranch, now, are in the positions of the chickens. Losing Q 2 would be a little worse than dying, don't you think?

Christopher has had an offer from one of the big land companies for the ranch. They buy the big ranches and divide them and sell them as small farms to the settlers who are coming in from Nebraska and Missouri and Utah. At first Christopher was indignant about the offer. It was an insultingly small sum, he declared. But, in a day or two, he was saying that suppose he did sell a part of Q 2, leaving the direct home place and forty or fifty acres surrounding it——Darling Father said that if Christopher would show him how to make a living for eleven people from forty acres of land, particularly the forty surrounding the house, he would not have another word to say.

Christopher said if he and Irene left the place they would never take another penny from it, but would go on their own from that time on.

Neal, who was present, asked, "Own what, Chris?"

Irene answered, "Not our own property."

Aunt Gracia said, the other evening, "Christopher,

do you ever stop to think that right up to now you have never wanted anything, education, travel, leisure, that Q 2 hasn't given you?"

Christopher said: "I'm not forgetting, don't worry, Gracia. Though that is over, now. I'll never take another dollar from the place that I don't earn right here." (He is working hard on his new play. He has it well in hand, and the cast of characters all written. The principal part is to be for Mr. Sothern.) "What is troubling me now is Irene's health."

"Not Dick's health?" Aunt Gracia asked.

"Dick's health, too, and of course," Christopher said. "But I am not responsible for Dick. I can't do anything about his health."

"Can't you?" Aunt Gracia inquired.

"Meaning, my dear?" Chris answered.

"That Dick is ill. That he is doing the work of six men. That you could stop worrying him, and insist that your wife stop it." Aunt Gracia, talking like that, gives you an idea of the conditions here.

Irene mopes around all the time and says she does not feel well. She doesn't look well, either. But she eats—well, at least heartily and often—and she will never go outside the house, not even in this new June weather. Dr. Joe says that he is damned if he knows what is the matter with her. Christopher said, "Sir, do you mean to suggest that my wife is malingering?"

"No," Dr. Joe said. "Do you?"

I must run now and help Aunt Gracia. I love you both, Greg and you, dear, very dearly.—LUCY.

CHAPTER VII

I

July 6, 1900.

DEAR, DEAR SISTER JUDY: Last night I had a terrible nightmare. I screamed and woke. I found unhappiness sitting like a giant on my chest. I began to cry. Neal came in, wrapped in his dressing gown. You know how Neal seems to lose command of himself when I cry, so almost at once I had to stop. I hoped he might go back to bed again. He would not. He insisted on sitting on the foot of my bed until we could, as he said, discover together what troubled me until I woke crying in the night. Finally, after quite a talk, we found that it was, probably, fear. Fear, you know, of our losing Q 2.

Speaking of fear usually makes Neal impatient. Last night he said—he is often sarcastic of late, but Grandfather told me, privately, that was but another manifestation of his age—of course crying was the best thing to do in the face of fear or danger. He said when Teddy charged up San Juan Hill he got afraid they were going to lose the battle, about midway up the hill, and put his head down and wept salt tears into his horse's mane. He said that was the way to win battles—to sit and cry, as Olympe did, and make plans for the poorhouse.

I told Neal that, if we called it a battle, Irene must be the foe, and that she cried most of the time—always when either Christopher or Father was present.

Neal said tears were her weapons, not ours, he hoped.

I explained that I was not using tears for weapons. I was using them for lamentations over having to leave Q 2.

Neal said, who was going to leave? He wasn't. If worst came to worst, he would stay in Q 2 as a stableboy for some Swede farmer. He said he would stay just as he would stay in America and be an American if some foreign power, even Spain, should conquer us. He said, too, that just as there was nothing he wouldn't do, including the shedding of blood, to save his country from foreign usurpation, so there was nothing he would not do to save Q 2 for the Quilters. (For one thing, I think, it was the Fourth of July only day before yesterday.)

What we must do, Neal said, was what Uncle Phineas had tried to do with the Nome scheme: separate Irene and Christopher. He thinks Christopher would stop thinking about selling Q 2 if he were removed from what Neal calls the venom of Irene's proximity.

I thought separating them would be wrong, since they loved each other. Neal said it was not love. It was infatuation. He called me an idiot. I did not like it, so perhaps I am not one.

I told Neal that it was difficult for me to understand how so much trouble could be caused about nothing but money. Money is real. It can be handled and earned, and lost. People have it, to save or to spend. I have always fancied that real trouble had to be about vague

things, such as love, or hate; or about unobtainable things, like health for darling Father and Greg, or a baby for Uncle Phineas and Olympe; or unpreventable things, like war and death.

Father just came in. Aunt Gracia needs me, so I must end this letter. Father looks very tired most of the time lately. He told Neal the other day that he could not work and fight both, and that he had to work. He said for you not to worry about Bryan's nomination. That he would have been elected in 1896, if he had ever been going to be. He sends you and Greg his dearest love, and a check, and says there is plenty more of both where these came from.

I hope what I have written about money won't worry you, dear. Aunt Gracia said the other day that what we send to you and Greg to live on would **not** be pin money for Chris, let alone Chris and Irene.

I love you, Judy. I love dear Greg. I love you both together.—LUCY.

II

July 31, 1900.

DEAREST DEAR JUDY-PUDY: Olympe says that she wrote to you several days ago and told you about darling Father's narrow escape from death. All of me goes empty, even yet, when I think of it. Fancy the wagon's tongue breaking when Father was driving Bell and Zebub over Quilter Mountain! Grandfather had advised against the team, but Father was in a hurry and Bread and Butter are so slow.

If Indian Charles, from 3 O X, had not happened to be

right there, Father would certainly have been killed. Aunt Gracia thinks that God put Indian Charles at that particular curve to stop the horses, though, as Grandfather says, that bears thinking through. It does seem that the simpler way would have been to have had Neal notice the tongue when he was overhauling the wagon. Darling Father would be angry if he knew I had written that. He says overhauling the wagon was his job and not Neal's, and that Neal is in no way responsible for the accident. Poor Neal keeps declaring that the tongue was in good shape a week ago, and everyone is being so exaggeratedly nice to him that I scarcely see how he can endure it. Even Dong Lee baked Neal's special tart for supper that evening.

Father makes light of the whole affair, though he strained the ligaments in his wrist and has to wear his arm in a sling. About all that Father is, is thankful. Irene and Christopher were going with him and, at the last moment, decided against it. If three people had been on the seat, Father thinks none of them could have stayed there. Aunt Gracia attributes Christopher's and Irene's decision to God, too. Isn't it strange how trying to see the hand of Providence in things does confuse them? I have been thinking a great deal, lately, about God. I wrote a poem about Him. It is the accident, I think. Until Uncle Phineas came home, the accident had a most sobering, almost religious effect on all of us.

This is odd. When you and Greg went away, it seemed as if the happiness we had had because of having you with us never had equalled, nor made up for, the unhappiness we had to endure because you were gone.

But, when Uncle Phineas came home on Wednesday, it seemed as if the unhappiness of having him away had been nothing compared to the fun of having him home again. Uncle Phineas, I believe, is one of those people whom his family appreciate more after they have been without him for rather a long time.

He is in splendid high spirits. Perhaps he has found another gold mine. No one, I think, has remembered to ask him. While he was away, Olympe kept longing for his return in order that he and she might make their plans together for the poorhouse. But she has been so happy since he came that she has forgotten all about the poorhouse. She is wearing her gayer frocks, and giving only her lighter, more whimsical speeches.

Since the accident, I haven't heard either Irene or Chris mention selling the place. Chris is working hard on his new play. Mr. Joseph Jefferson is to have the leading rôle. Also, Chris has done another sonnet to Irene. He did it yesterday during our lesson time. It is fortunate that Irene has so many splendid rhymes: green, serene, sheen, queen, been (as Grandfather pronounces it), clean, and dozens of others. Greg would have a hard time rhyming you into a sonnet. But Greg would never think of writing a sonnet to you. Aren't you glad? Not, of course, that I disapprove of authors, since I am planning to be one. But I am going to be a writer, rather than an author. When I told Chris that, and that I was going to cover pages and pages with real written words, and then stack them up and sell them, he said: "Precisely. You are going to be a hardy perennial author." And then he gave me quite a lecture about

ambitions and bandbox zeniths. But Grandfather said, not at all. That he had yet to associate real genius with the ability for being enterprisingly unproductive.

It is past bedtime. I love you both very dearly, and I send my love to you both in this letter.—LUCY.

CHAPTER VIII

I

August 1, 1900.

DEAREST JUDY DEAR: Father and Uncle Phineas and Chris have all gone to Portland for a few days. They left here last Thursday. I think that they will return to-morrow. Father had to see Dr. Joe. I don't know why the others went, unless it was, perhaps, for the trip.

Christopher was no sooner out of sight than Irene began to move Father's belongings out of his room, preparing to unpack her boxes and to instal herself and Christopher in Father's room. She said she positively had not asked Father to exchange rooms with her. She said he had offered to do so, because he had heard that she wanted a cupola room in order to fix the cupola up as an Oriental cozy corner.

Olympe asked her why she had not made the exchange while Christopher had been at home. Irene said because she wished to surprise him. (It is only by remembering Grandfather's sixth rule, under "B," that I am restraining myself from underlining almost every word in this letter, and clubbing it all up with !! !)

Aunt Gracia and Olympe tried to reason with Irene. She kept right along dumping things out of Father's

room and tugging her things in. I ran and told Grandfather. He would not budge. Grandfather, of late, budes less and less. The only thing he has said about the entire affair he said this morning when Irene took him into the room to show it to him. He said: "My word! My wordless word!"

Neal declares that he and I should try to be broad-minded and receptive toward the new. He says that forward steps should be made in house furnishings as well as in other things. He says that perhaps the ultra-moderns are right in attempting to get away from the austerity of the early colonial furnishings. He says that perhaps we do need more colour, more daintiness, more luxury, and more invitations to relaxation.

Aunt Gracia says that if Neal and I find daintiness in that room, her imagination pales before our conception of a really honest, cleanly junk heap. She said that a fishnet stuck full of trash was not merely inartistic, it was also a wall-wide inducement to dirt. She said she could get all the colour she needed from the Turkey carpets in the front and back parlours that Great-great-grandfather had bought in the Orient, or from the pulled rugs that Great-grandmother and her sister-in-law had made. She said the Oriental cozy corner was not an invitation to relaxation. She said it was an invitation to assassination.

Poor, lovely Aunt Gracia has grown bitter of late. For one thing, I think that her blackmailing, as she called it, has turned into a boomerang. Irene told me about it. That is, Irene said that if Chris knew she didn't have to stay here, that Archie was pleading

It took us some time, you see, to get to the explanation of the tragedy that Aunt Gracia feared.

Grandfather said to her that he, like Lucy, was not quite clear on this point. He could not, he said, visualize Christopher running about menacing fatuous ex-husbands.

Aunt Gracia replied that it seemed to her the real tragedy impending was for Christopher to discover Irene.

Grandfather smiled that heavenly smile of his that usually means a pearl. "He won't, dearest. Set your mind at rest. He won't. That, in itself, constitutes the tragedy—or the triumph—of marriage."

I think that I do not fully understand this. But, since I am sure it is a pearl, I am quoting it for you. You are married. You may understand it. At any rate, no matter what it means, exactly, it must mean that no tragedy, like *Hamlet*, with everyone lying about dead, is apt to happen.

Judy dear, I love you. Will you tell Greg that I love him, too?—LUCY.

II

August 28, 1900.

DEAR, DEAR JUDY-FUDY: It was good of you to take so long to explain to me what Grandfather meant about the tragedy, or the triumph, of marriage. I think it rather bold of you to say that Grandfather, who is eighty years old, is wrong about it. You are only twenty-two years old. But it does not matter. I am no longer interested in marriage. I have decided, with Neal, never to marry.

Though, of late, I dislike to be on Neal's side about anything. Some great change, terrible, grewsome, seems to have occurred within him. (I know that is a poor sentence, and that it is of a literary flavour which I despise. But I have tried several drafts on scratch paper and it seems to be the best I can do.) Or, to put it simply as Grandfather always advises: If Neal had been a dog for the past few months we should have been afraid he would bite us. Now he acts as if he had bitten us and were glad of it.

I do not know what has caused this change in Neal, but I know who has. The person is Uncle Phineas. When Uncle Phineas came home from his prospecting trip last month, he came home with a secret. He told Neal the secret. I am sure of this. They got off alone together and whispered about the secret.

When I said this to Neal he was angry. He said to have a person like me in it was a scourge to any family. He did not mean that, I am sure. But he was very polite, and talked in a low voice, even when he called names, such as "rubberneck" and threatened. After the many years of deep study that I have devoted to character, I hope I have at least discovered that no one gets as angry over anything as Neal got unless it is the truth. If I had been making a childishly simple mistake, Neal would have teased me and laughed at me.

Neal said that it was crumby—everything is crumby with Neal, just now, but that is an improvement over wormy—for me to think that Uncle Phineas would share a secret with him and with no other member of the family. It isn't—crumby, I mean—because, if it were

rather a naughty or mischievous secret, as it probably would be since Uncle Phineas had it for his, Neal would be more in sympathy with it than would any other member of the family. Not, of course, that either Neal or Uncle Phineas would do any wrong thing, but—well, you understand what I mean. For instance, Uncle Phineas, I believe, is the only member of the family who would join Neal in his plan to separate Irene and Christopher. Of course I have no proof that Uncle Phineas has not shared his secret with some other member of the family. All I know about that is, if he has shared it with someone else it has not affected the someone as it has affected Neal.

Father has changed a bit since he returned from Portland, but, if possible, for the better. I think that is because Chris has stopped worrying him. Did I tell you that Christopher went to Portland to try to raise some money? He couldn't. He has come home again and is working hard on his new play.

Uncle Phineas has remained in Portland. Even though he is not running up hotel bills, but is visiting Dr. Joe, it does seem strange for him to remain in the city for so long. Olympe is furious about it. She does fury beautifully—not at all in an ordinary fashion, but with dignity and hauteur. She manages it so nicely, I think, because she blames Irene and not Uncle Phineas. She pretends that no person in his senses would stay on the same ranch with Irene if he could stay elsewhere. I should think that she might blame Chris because he is responsible for Irene. She does not. She pities him. That is worse

than blaming, of course. Though poor Chris does seem to deserve to be pitied.

Judy, dear, he was stunned when he discovered that Irene had exchanged rooms with Father. He came downstairs alone, looking faded and like a poor photograph of himself.

"Dick, old boy," he said to Father, "I'm tremendously sorry about this fracas upstairs. It isn't that Irene is selfish. She's the most generous little thing in the world, really. She doesn't understand——"

Father said of course she didn't, and neither did he. He said there was no tradition that he was aware of which would keep the various members of the family from making an exchange of rooms, when the exchange was advantageous.

It may be advantageous for Irene. For all the rest of us it is an irritation. A dozen times a day, beginning with the morning towels and ending with the evening lamps, some one of us makes a mistake about the rooms. We stand and knock at the door of the room that is now Father's thinking that Irene or Christopher may be in it. And, since we know that Father is never in his room in the daytime, we open that door and walk right in, intruding on Irene and Christopher in a most humiliating fashion.

Father himself forgets. He came from his bath, the other evening—he was very tired—and opened the door to his old room and walked right in. He came so quietly, in his slippers, that Irene had not heard him. She was in the room alone and she was frightened. (She said it was

partly because she had never seen Father in his dressing gown before.) She screamed and screamed and screamed. She cried, and had what she calls a heart attack. Chris was frantic, and poor, darling Father was stunned from the shock of having caused a lady such distress.

During the heart attack, Irene said that any decent house would have keys to the doors. Wednesday, Aunt Gracia went to the attic and found the keys for the doors, and shined them up with Sapolio and put them in the keyholes. None of us use them, except Irene. Neal is very smart about them. He says they open a new era on the Q 2 Ranch. He has made up a song, to the tune of "Bringing in the Sheaves," which he calls "Turning Quilter Keys," and which he sings about, objectionably.

I send my love to you, dear, and to Greg.—LUCY.

CHAPTER IX

I

September 10, 1900.

JUDITH DEAREST: Christopher, I think, is going to sell Q 2 Ranch. It seems odd and perhaps not right that a private disaster like this should completely overshadow, for us, the terrible disaster in Galveston day before yesterday. But it has. I think that Christopher gave us credit for more altruism, and so told us yesterday when we were all so troubled over the Galveston sufferers. I think that he thought our own trouble would diminish by comparison. It has not.

When all the mortgages are paid, Christopher will have about \$9,000 left over. If he and Irene take half, that will leave \$4,500 for Grandfather, Father, Olympe, Uncle Phineas, Aunt Gracia, you, Greg, Neal, and me.

Christopher says that we can buy a pleasant Wilamette Valley farm for less than half of that, and start free and clear. That will be much better, he says, since this place is too large for Father and Neal to handle, especially since Father's health is so uncertain.

Indeed, Christopher declares, Father's health is one of his chief reasons for selling. He thinks it is not fair to expect Father to carry on this struggle under a load of

debt. Aside from the sentiment attached to the place, Christopher says, a smaller place, clear of debt, would be better for everyone. However, he says he will not act hastily, nor counter to our wishes in the matter. The offer is open for sixty days.

No one says anything. No one will say anything. I mean, not anything at all. I mean, not one single word. Not, "Yes, Christopher," or, "No, Christopher." I believe that Uncle Phineas might talk, if he were here. Uncle Phineas is lost.

Neal and I are the only ones who know this. After Christopher broke the news to us yesterday morning, Neal and I rode to Quilterville. We sent a telegram to Uncle Phineas, in care of Dr. Joe. Neal had to tell me what he was going to do because he had to borrow my pocket money, to put with his money, to send the telegram. We stayed in Quilterville several hours waiting for the reply. When it came it was from Dr. Joe. It said: "Phineas not here. Mum's the word. No occasion for worry. He is O. K. Joe."

We had no money to answer that telegram. Neal says he thinks that Uncle Phineas has gone on another prospecting trip. It is odd, because Olympe got a letter from him this morning, written in Portland and mailed from there. I picked up the envelope and looked to see the postmark.

Neal thinks that Uncle Phineas wrote several letters, and left them for Dr. Joe to mail in regular order. It would not be unlike Uncle Phineas. The fact that Olympe had sent him her garnet set to be cleaned, and that he did not mention it in this letter, might seem

to prove Neal right. Olympe has written, now, to have him sell the set instead.

Aunt Gracia is going to sell Great-great-great-grandmother's silver tea set. It is hers, you know. Olympe says the Turkey carpets belong to Uncle Phineas and have ever since he settled the estate in Virginia. She is going to have him sell them. The amount should keep you and Greg in comparative comfort for a long time, she thinks. Aunt Gracia is hoping for a teacher's position. She is hunting out old books to bone up for the examinations. Neal plans to stay right here and work for his board only, if necessary. Grandfather will apply for his pension after all these years. It will be about seventeen dollars a month.

Aunt Gracia has asked me to come and help her now, so I must go. Dear, I love you and Greg very, very much.—LUCY.

II

September 21, 1900.

DEAREST, DEAREST JUDY-PUDY: If you have worked out, in your philosophy for living, any special thing to say or to do to prepare you for a shock, it would be wise to say or do it right now. I have very bad news to tell you.

The stress and worry of the last several months, combined with darling Father's ill health and the final news that Q 2 is to be sold, has unhinged his mind. Just a little bit, Judy dear. Not enough so that any of us had noticed it. Truly, truly. We had no idea of such a thing, before the blow fell. And, if the blow had not fallen,

we would not know it now. He seems just the same as always. Truly he does, Judy. Perhaps a little sweeter and kinder—but really just the same. So, when you think of dear, darling Father, think of him as acting just as he acted when you and Greg left home in March. If you were to walk right into the room this minute, you would not see a bit of difference in Father's mentality. Truly, truly you wouldn't, Judy. But, dear, the truth is that Father is now a baptized Siloamite. But remember quickly, Judy, before this makes you ill or anything: *Father is just the same wonderful man.*

Wednesday those two pleasant young missionaries, Mr. Cordinger and Mr. Withmore, came to the house. Since they knew nothing about our troubles, and were jolly and interesting, it was almost a blessing to have them. If they had not unhinged dear, darling Father's mind, it would still be better than not to have them here. They are staying on, in the attic room, for a week or so. You know they never force their religious views on anyone, or even ask anyone to join their church; so how it could have happened that they unhinged Father's mind, I cannot understand.

To-day, when they and Aunt Gracia and darling Father started to drive to Quilter River, we had no idea that Father was not in a normal state. Judith, when they got to Quilter River, Father allowed himself to be baptized in it. They all came home and deliberately told us.

Knowing Father as we know him, and knowing his opinions of even less ornamental nonconformist religions, of course such an act can mean but one thing. I

have not found courage yet to discuss the matter with anyone except Neal, not even with Grandfather.

Neal says that he thinks there is some dark, sinister meaning behind it, like blackmail. Neal says that Christopher thinks so, too. If Christopher does think this, it seems odd that he has now ridden to Quilterville to mail a letter asking Dr. Joe to come to Father.

I do not believe that it was blackmail. Those two young missionaries are the sort that Grandfather calls clean, wholesome chaps. And, if they were wicked, how could they blackmail a man like darling Father who has led a perfect life?

Judith, dear, I think I am not able to write more now. If I had found any consolation for myself, I would give it to you. But I have found none. I have nothing to give to you but my love.—LUCY.

III

September 22, 1900.

DEAREST JUDY DEAR: If only I had not sent that letter to you yesterday! Or if only I had not spent all my money with Neal's telegraphing to Uncle Phineas, and could telegraph to you now to disregard letter, as Christopher did that time in the university when he planned to commit suicide, and wrote to us about it, and then changed his mind.

Neal and I have discovered that Father is not, and never was for one moment, insane. I can write that word now. I could not write it yesterday.

Last night Neal decided to go straight to Father and

ask him why he had been baptized. I advised against it, fearing that it might make Father worse again. Neal, fortunately this time, paid no more attention to my advice than he usually does.

Neal was excited and frightened, though he denied it. He went rushing upstairs and followed his own quick knock straight into Irene and Christopher's room. Christopher had forgotten, again, to lock their door. Irene had her hair done up in kid curlers. Neal apologized and pretended not to see. Irene had a slight heart attack. I think because she has assumed, without actually saying it, that her hair waved naturally. It was unlike Neal to tell about the kid curlers. He would not have told a month ago. Sometimes it seems as if Christopher were selling more of the Quilters than just their family estate. Yesterday, I thought, he had sold darling Father's sanity. That is not true, because this is what Father told Neal.

He said that he liked to pay his debts. He said that the accident had frightened Aunt Gracia and had started her to worrying, again, about his immortal soul. She thought that if he had died not in a state of grace, as she calls it, he would have been doomed to whatever Avernus the Siloamites had manufactured. He did not have their conception of it clearly in his mind, but he was sure that it was shockingly unpleasant. He said that Aunt Gracia had been a mother to us children, and had stood with him, shoulder to shoulder, all his life. He said she had enough to trouble her, just now, without being troubled about him. And for him to allow himself to

be dipped, once, into Quilter River seemed to him a very small payment to make to her.

Neal told Father that he could not go with him in that argument. Neal said that he thought hypocrisy was never justified. Father said he had tried to foil his conscience with the same casuistry, but that he could not. Father said kindness was its own justification. He said that the sacrifice he had made to please Gracia and to set her mind at ease was so genuine that it cancelled hypocrisy. Neal said that he did not believe in sacrifice. Father said, "Neither does Christopher."

Neal had to admit, of course, that it always depended upon the sacrifice and who made it. Neal could not understand why Aunt Gracia should have worried about Father, in particular. Neal said he had never heard of her worrying about any other Quilter's immortal soul.

Father told him why. Father said that we children were old enough to know, and that he had meant, for some time, to tell us.

Judy, a few months before Neal was born, a man who lived in these parts then was courting Aunt Gracia. Aunt Gracia was infatuated with him. Mother never did like him, and she had once complained to Father that the man stared at her. But Father said Mother was so very beautiful that he could not blame anyone for looking at her. Still, Father kept an eye on the man; but he soon succeeded in convincing Father that he was interested only in Aunt Gracia.

One evening, when Father knew that the man was on our place, Father stopped work a bit early. He did not

distrust the man in the least, or he would not have allowed him to be courting Aunt Gracia. So he doesn't know why he stopped work early that evening—he just did so. And, as he was coming through the oak grove, he heard Mother scream. Father spurred his Cayuse, and got there just in time to shoot and kill the man before he had harmed Mother.

Father went straight to the sheriff. In a few days they had a trial. The jury acquitted Father without leaving the courtroom. And the judge apologized to Father for having bothered him with the affair.

None of this has ever troubled Father's conscience at all. He said there was but one thing to do, and he did it. But he says that, since Aunt Gracia deep in her own heart has never truly forgiven him, she thinks the Lord has not forgiven him either. She even thinks that the Lord would not forgive Father, unless Father made some special kowtow in his direction. So Father made the kowtow to gratify Aunt Gracia.

Not long after the trouble, Father said, the missionaries of the Siloamites came to the house, and Aunt Gracia became a convert to their faith. The religion turned Aunt Gracia from a hard, bitter, broken person into a useful, serene, lovable woman again. Because of this, Father said, he felt that he also owed a certain debt to the Siloamites—a debt that he was glad to pay.

Father said he told Aunt Gracia that he could not say her religious beliefs were true, because he did not know. He could not say that they were false, because he did not know. He knew nothing. But, since her religion was a beautiful, kind, and just religion, he hoped that

it might be true. And that, if with nothing stronger for a foundation than hope, his baptism would mean anything to her, he was willing to go through with the ceremony. She told him that it would mean everything to her. He was baptized.

Neal asked Father why Aunt Gracia's foolish happiness meant more to him than the humiliation of the rest of the family, particularly yours, Judy, and Neal's and mine.

Father answered that if an act, which was both kind and useful, could humiliate his children, then he was sorry.

Since you have asked for it twice, I will send you my poem about God. Grandfather says that it has a thought in it; but he says that he thinks my medium will prove to be the stately splendour of English prose. He named my poem for me.

OMNIPOTENCE

God was sad, and he sighed,
"How little the earth men know,
They think I am satisfied
With my work down there below.
So they blame me for blunders of hand,
And they scorn me for tasks ill done.
Why can't they understand
That I have only begun?
Do they think I am unaware
That much I have wrought has been wrong?
My burdens are heavy to bear.
Why won't they help me along?"

IV

A knock, demand nicely moderated by deference, tapped on the glass of Lynn MacDonald's office door.

Her secretary said, "Shall I have your car brought around, Miss MacDonald, or shall I order your dinner sent up to you?"

Lynn MacDonald added the last page of Lucy's final letter to the pile of pages in front of her and smoothed it flat with her palms. Near the telephone were Neal Quilter's letters, a package of neatly taped temptation.

"Neither just now, Miss Kingsbury. I think I shall stay here for half an hour or so longer. But you must go straight home. I thought you had gone some time ago."

"I can't help you?"

"Not now, thank you."

The tape untied easily. From the envelope with the blue figure 1 on it she took Neal Quilter's first letter, and shook the thick folded pages free from their creases.

CHAPTER X

I

Wednesday night,
October 10, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: I am just home from Quilterville where I got your telegram asking me to tell you the truth about what has happened here. I told Grandfather and the others that they had no right to lie to you, and that they couldn't fool you if they tried. I knew you could tell from the crazy telegram we sent to you that we were hiding something from you.

Judy, I'm going to do for you what I'd want you to do for me. I'm going to tell you the truth. This business of sparing you and all that is sentimental twaddle. It isn't only your right to know, it is your duty to know that Father did not die mercifully and peacefully and all that rot last Monday night.

Father was murdered in his room. He was shot and killed. That would seem horror enough, wouldn't it? That isn't the horror. That isn't why we have been lying to you. That isn't what has beaten us. I'll tell you what the real horror is. And yet—it can't be true. If it can't be true, it must be false. I'll tell you why. I've thought it all out. I've thought it all out carefully. It can't be true. I mean, it can't be true that some one of us right

here in the house that night, some member of our family, the Quilter family, murdered Father.

That is the first thing we have to do, Judy, you and I. We have to prove that no member of the Quilter family murdered Father. When that is out of the way, we can think straight again. We can go ahead and find out who did do it—damn him! And we'll attend the hanging.

That's why, before I tell you anything else, I'll have to tell you what I have thought out about the family. You know I'm not as crumby about the family as the rest of you are. You know I can think more clearly about them than you could. I know that we are a dog-gone faulty bunch. I have accepted that. I think it wise to accept that, first.

Beginning with Grandfather, who is the best of the lot now Father is dead. Grandfather is a sentimentalist, and something of a poseur, and—— Let it go at that. What's the use? Next to Father, Grandfather is the decentest person, man or woman, that I have ever known or ever shall know. He's not perfect, I suppose. But he comes too darn near being for me to point his imperfections. Any denial of wrongdoing for Grandfather would be desecration. Grandfather's world revolved around Father—and Aunt Gracia and Lucy.

Now for the handsome Christopher. Chris is wormy with selfishness, and lazy as a dog, and weak as water, and conceited. All right. But when it comes to murder—he's as clean out of it as Grandfather or Lucy, and there's no sense in dodging it. Chris would half kill Father with worry—he's been at that, hard, for six months now. But, in his way, we are bound to grant

that Chris loved Father. He wouldn't shoot him, if he had the best reason in the world for doing it. We know that. And we know, too, that right now Chris needed to have Father alive, as an excuse for selling Q 2 and to manage the smaller ranch Chris said he was going to get for us. Father's death puts a decided crimp in Chris's plans.

Olympe. She's vain and affected, and has her share of common ordinary faults. But could any living being, in his senses, suggest that Olympe would shoot a dying kitten to put it out of its misery? If Chris has sold us out, as he was threatening to do, Father's ability to establish us on another place was Olympe's best chance for keeping out of the poorhouse she's been talking about all the time lately. Olympe loved Father.

Aunt Gracia. She has had her mind all mussed up for years with that fool religion of hers. She has gone a bit sour, of late, as the rest of us have, from overwork and overworry. But anyone who would whisper murder in the same breath with Aunt Gracia's name would be a liar and a criminal fool, and I know it, and you know it, and everyone who has ever seen her knows it. Just writing it makes me hot. Aunt Gracia loved Father.

Irene. She is one of the crumbiest specimens I ever saw. She's at the bottom of Chris's threatening to sell the place—she has nagged him into it. She has caused all sorts of trouble here from the first night she came. I've hated her like a burr under the saddle. I hate her yet. Partly because of that I know that she would not commit a murder—could not have committed this murder. It took a smart person, and a plucky person,

and a darn tricky person to get away with this business on Monday night. Irene is a first-rate idiot. She is a chatterbox, and a coward. Tell me that a woman who is afraid of a cow will walk into a room and shoot a man dead? Not on your life she wouldn't. If she had wanted Father out of the way, she might have tried slow poison. She had no reason for wanting Father out of the way. She didn't love him, or anyone. But she liked Father; she couldn't help it. Three months ago Father gave up trying to influence Chris in any way about selling Q 2. Irene needed Father alive for the same reason Chris needed him—his ill health as an excuse for selling us out; his ability to manage the new place for us.

Lucy and I were the only other people in the house on Monday night. The missionaries who had been visiting here left Q 2 early Monday morning, and old Dong Lee went in with them to Portland to see a dentist.

I'll be damned if I'll defend Lucy. And Neal Quilter didn't do it. I know that. The others here may not know it. If I were any one of them, I'd suspect Neal Quilter, and with good cause.

Read this, Jude. I've had plenty of reason to think, here lately, that Father was losing his mind. His giving up, and allowing Chris to plan to sell us out. And then that baptism junk. Lucy wrote it to you. Father's explanation satisfied her. It didn't satisfy me—not by a long shot; not from Father. Father was no sap. Well, then, suppose I knew that he'd rather be cleanly dead than living with his mind worse than dead—and he would. Suppose I knew that Father would rather die than to have the Quilter name tainted with insanity?

He would have. You know Father, and Grandfather, and their "ten generations of sound-minded, clean-bodied men and women." All right. I am smart enough, and I have pluck enough to have planned this thing, and to have done it.

Read this. Having Father dead doesn't do any of us any good. Having Chris die would have saved the Q 2 Ranch. Since Chris had no sons, the ranch would have gone to Grandfather. Well, Father and Chris have changed rooms lately. All of us were always butting into the wrong rooms. I starred at it. Irene was downstairs in the sitting room when Father was shot. Suppose I had meant to sneak in and kill Chris, and had been so excited—I would have been excited, I suppose—that I got into the wrong room. Suppose I had seen a man there in bed, and suppose I'd shot on the instant, thinking that he was Chris. That is, suppose I had meant to kill Chris and had killed Father, by mistake.

I am the only member of the family who is unsentimental enough to do it. Or mean enough. Or, funny how we'll stand up for our precious selves, loyal enough to Q 2 Ranch. Not long ago I told Lucy that I'd stop at nothing, including bloodshed, to save the place. I said it. I meant it. I must have had murder in my mind—or the potentialities for murder—to have said a thing of the sort.

You see, assuming that I did it, it works out smoothly enough. I didn't do it. I swear to God that I know I did not. If I had done it, I'd know it. I didn't do it. Lucy knows that I didn't. Lucy knows that within two minutes after we'd heard the shot, she came running

into my room, through our inside door, and found him—me, I mean—hammering at the door into the hall, trying to break the damn thing down. But then you know, Jude, that Lucy would lie herself into Hades to save me from being suspected. This, though, isn't a question of her needing to lie. I mean, she did find me locked in my room. I know that. It is a fact. I've got to keep hold of it, and of one or two other facts that I have. You see, you and I have to prove, first, that I didn't murder Father. I mean, that none of the Quilters did do it. I mean——

II

Later, Wednesday night.

I stopped writing there and went out and walked to the road and back. Breathed some sweet snow air into my lungs. Cleared my head. Time I did, I guess. That last page or so seems to be rather raving. Sorry. But I am going to send it along because I want you to have all this straight, and because, as Grandfather always says, we do have to think this thing through—straight through.

Straight thinking isn't easy as yet. Writing does me a pile of good. To write a thing you have to get it more or less into shape. That is what I'm going to do. I'm going to sit here—I am staying up for a few nights—and write the whole thing out, in black letters on white paper to you. It will keep my thoughts in order—you've no notion what a filthy mess they have been in for the past two days. It will do more than that.

I said, in the beginning of this, that it was your duty to know the truth. This is what I meant. It would be just like you not to think so, but you've a long way the best of it, being off in Colorado and not in the midst of this hell here. You should be able to think better and to see more clearly than I can. I'll give you a straight account of facts from here. You'll have the enormous advantage of perspective. Together we'll get the truth. We have to. You and I are young. The others are old. I don't wish to be crumby and sentimental about it. But you and I won't even have a right to die until we find who murdered Father. Out in the air, just now, I decided that, if a member of the family did do it—then we must find that out, too. You know, Judy; if not for the sake of punishment, at least for the sake of justice to the others.

Take a brace then, dear, and get ready for the facts. They aren't sweet, I'll warn you.

On Monday evening we all milled around in the sitting room, about the same as usual, as far as I can remember. I have been so darn grouchy, lately, though, and so much interested in *Descent of Man* that I haven't paid much attention to the folks. I have asked Chris about Monday evening (one doesn't quizz Grandfather), and he says that no one acted nervous, or excited, or peculiar in any way. An opinion worth nothing, I am afraid, since he was so busy spooning with Irene that he probably would not have noticed a fit on the hearthrug. I think perhaps Lucy will know whether anyone acted in an unusual way. But Lucy, poor little kid, isn't fit to be questioned just now. Aunt Gracia agrees with

Chris. So, for the present, we'll record that everyone acted as he usually does act.

Around nine o'clock Olympe went up to bed. Then Grandfather went, and Aunt Gracia went with him, as usual, to turn down his bed and so on. Chris and Irene ambled out together. I waited until I was sure I wouldn't meet them hugging in the hall, and then I went and suggested to Lucy that it was time for her to come. She said she would when she had finished the chapter she was reading. I heard her come into her room, just before I went to sleep. I don't know, nor does anyone seem to know, what time Father came up to his room.

The next thing I knew I heard the shot, loud as a cannon, bang through the house. I jumped out of bed and ran to my door. It was locked. I ran back to the table and got the lamp lighted and began to hunt around for the key. I don't know why, but I thought that the door was locked on the inside. I couldn't find the key. I was scared. I grabbed a chair and began to try to bang through the door with it. At about the second bang, Lucy came running into my room in her nightgown, screaming my name, and what was it, and that her door was locked. I didn't pay much attention to her. I was crazy by that time, for the house was a bedlam. Everyone was trying to do what I was trying to do—get doors open. And everyone was shouting and screaming to everyone else.

I had busted two of the bedroom chairs before I realized what a fool I was—trying to crash a heavy oak door with a frail maple chair.

I noticed that Lucy had gone. I ran into her room. Her

lamp was lighted, and she was showing more sense than I had shown by trying nail files and hairpins in her key-hole. All the time the noise in the hall kept up. Everyone was shouting and calling and rattling his door and trying to bang it down—everyone, that is, but Olympe. I'll tell you about her later.

I ran to Lucy's window. I had some wild idea of getting out that way. For a second, then, I almost keeled over. Things seemed to break loose and stampede in my head, and the only thought I could corral had to do with Aunt Gracia's judgment day. It took me fully half a minute to realize that the new world out there meant merely a heavy fall of snow. I opened the window. Snow was two inches deep on the sill. I leaned out. A cloud uncovered a ghastly moon. The snow had stopped. Lucy came and caught hold of me and said that we could not get out of that window. All this seems unimportant; but I wish I had as definite an account of everything that went on behind the other locked doors. This may not seem unimportant to you. I am trying to give you facts. You must try to interpret them.

I knew that Lucy was right about attempting to get out of the window. I closed it. She was shivering from cold and fright, so I got her wrapper and made her put it on. She went back to her job of trying to unlock the door with a nail file. I looked on her bureau to find something that might work better. I noticed the time by her little clock. It said ten minutes to twelve. It had seemed much longer, but I believe it had been less than ten minutes since we had heard the shot. Chris said that he looked at his clock, as he lighted his lamp, and it said

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a quarter to twelve. That tallies closely enough, I guess.

Chris missed Irene, for the first time, when the shot woke him, and he admits that he was senseless from fright. If he hadn't been, he could have climbed out of his window and have run along the porch roof right there to the window of Father's room. He did not know, of course, that the shot had been fired in Father's room. But, if he'd had his senses—something that none of us did have—he surely would have used the window and the porch roof to get with some other member of the family.

I found a glove buttoner on Lucy's bureau and tried it in the keyhole—fool's work, of course. I think the others were trying the same racket, though, for most of the noise had stopped by that time. I suppose because Lucy and I were together was the reason that we didn't call to the others. All the rest of them called. Aunt Gracia, in particular, kept shouting to Grandfather, over and over: "Father! Are you hurt? Father! Are you all right?" Lucy and I could hear Grandfather answering her, but Aunt Gracia seemed not to hear him. I think she was too excited, and too frightened to listen. Chris kept shouting like a Comanche for Irene.

I wonder, Jude, how we all knew that some terrible thing had happened? Nothing terrible ever had happened on Q 2. Why, then, the minute we all heard a gunshot in the house, late at night, did it throw us into a panic? I suppose the locked doors would be the answer. Yes, of course it was the locked doors and not the sound of the shot that locoed all of us.

Lucy and I were still monkeying with the lock when

Irene shoved the key into it. She unlocked the door and said, or sort of mewed at us, "Your father!" and ran across the hall to Chris's room.

Lucy's door was the first one that Irene unlocked. Lucy was in front of me; so she was the first one into Father's room—that is, since Irene had left it. Father was lying in bed. Irene had pulled the counterpane close under his chin. Lucy ran to him and caught him up in her arms.

Lucy is a thoroughbred all the way through. She didn't scream. She didn't faint. She didn't utter a sound. She turned her head and looked at me. That was all. The trouble is, the same paralyzed look is still on her face. It has not worn off, not in two days.

CHAPTER XI

I

I CAN'T star myself, much, for the next few minutes. Chris, Grandfather, Aunt Gracia, and Irene were in the room before I had realized that Father was dead. Then I thought that he had shot himself.

Grandfather took Lucy's place beside Father. He looked up at us and told us, "Richard has been shot and killed."

It would be Grandfather, wouldn't it, out of the whole herd of us, who would know without any proof, simply and surely know, that Father was not a suicide? I don't mean to be crumby and sentimental about it; but it is pretty rotten to think that, though Father had spent his life earning such a surety, Grandfather was the only one of us who would give it to him, then, on the minute and without proof. I wish I might even say that, having been told, we accepted Grandfather's statement on the instant. We did not. No, not us.

Chris said something about where was the gun. He began to tear through the bedding hunting for it. So did Aunt Gracia. So did Irene. So did I. There was no gun to be found. Father was not a suicide. He was shot, from a distance of at least several feet, with a .38 calibre gun. Since every man in the county who has a

gun has a .38 calibre Colt's, we are not, in spite of Chris's contentions to the contrary, going to be able to do much with that information. The point I am making, now, is that Father was not a suicide. I'll go into it more fully, later.

It was Lucy who first called our attention to the open window and to the rope. Now, Judy, read this carefully and see what you can do with it.

The window was wide open from the bottom. There was a thick rope hanging over the sill and out of it. One end of the rope had been tied with a slip knot around one of the heavy legs of the bed. The rope went across the carpet to the window, across the window sill, across the porch roof beneath the window, and dangled to the ground.

Looks easy, doesn't it? Some dirty cur had shot Father and had got out of the window by means of the rope. But the rope was covered with snow, and there was not a handprint in the snow on the window sill, nor a footprint in the new snow on the roof.

When I saw that rope, I would have jumped right out on to the roof, if Chris had not stopped me. He told me not to track the snow. He said that we must have a lantern. I ran down to the kitchen and got one. Read this, Jude. I have told you once, but I want to tell you again. We swung the lantern out over the porch roof, and the snow was a clean, unbroken sheet.

Chris looked at the clock on Father's mantelpiece. It said ten minutes past twelve. Twenty-five minutes, at the most, since we had heard the shot. Not long enough for the snow, if it had been snowing hard, to have cov-

ered the footprints. We went to the window again. No snow was falling. And I know that none had been falling at ten minutes to twelve. There is no dodging it: the rope had not been used. Or, as Chris keeps insisting, it had not been used as a means of escape. Since he can't produce any sort of theory as to what it might have been used for, I'll leave you that, for what it is worth, and get along.

The murderer had not climbed out of the window. There were, then, just two things that he could have done:

1. He could have got out of the house some other way.
2. He could have stayed in the house.

Grandfather said: "He has not escaped this way. He has escaped some other way."

"If he has escaped," Chris said. "If he hasn't, he is not going to."

Irene screamed, "He may still be right here in this room," and would have had a heart attack, if there had been time; but there wasn't.

With Grandfather directing, we made a quick, thorough search of Father's room. Chris, clinging to the suicide theory, I suppose, devoted his time to the bed. (He made one queer discovery; but, since it cannot amount to anything, I'll get along and tell you about it later.) He found no gun, of course. The only gun in Father's room was in his clothes closet, twenty feet away from the bed. His gun was fully loaded, and behind some boxes on the top closet shelf. You don't need this, but I'll give it to you. With the wound, if he had had strength to move, which he had not, Father could

not have moved without leaving a trail of blood. Irene had blood on the front of her wrapper and on her sleeve. She got it there when she had been lifting Father. Those were the only blood-stains anywhere that were not on the bed covers.

The room was easy to search. There was nothing anyone could have got under but the bed, and nothing to hide behind. We pounded through the clothes closet, and that ended the search there.

Grandfather said that Chris, he, and I would go to search the house. He said for Aunt Gracia, Irene, and Lucy to stay in Father's room, lock the door after us when we left, and close and lock the window.

Lucy said, "But where is Olympe?"

II

We all, including Grandfather, forgot the plan of having the ladies lock themselves in Father's room. We all went rushing like mad things down to Olympe's room. Irene kept mooring: "I unlocked her door. I unlocked her door last of all."

The door was unlocked. There, stretched straight on the floor in her nightgown, was Olympe. Irene screamed as only Irene can scream. She thought, I guess, as I thought—that Olympe had been murdered, too. Aunt Gracia ran to her. She found that she was breathing all right, that she had merely fainted.

Every second seemed precious to us, just then. So, after we had made a quick but absolutely complete search of Olympe's room, we left Lucy and Irene with her, and went on to go through the rest of the house.

I had brought two lanterns from the kitchen. I had a notion of taking one of them and running out to search the grounds. Grandfather pointed that, if the fellow was outside he was, and far on his way. But, if he was inside, we had a chance of finding him and keeping him here.

Aunt Gracia had insisted upon coming with us men. That made Grandfather, Aunt Gracia, Chris, and I the ones who searched the house that first hour. Grandfather said for Aunt Gracia and Chris to take one of the lanterns and search the front of the house, and for him and me to take the other lantern and search the back of the house. Chris got the gun out of Father's closet and, at Grandfather's bidding, I got Grandfather's gun out of the commode drawer in his room. We thought it fortunate, just then, that both guns had their chambers full, ready for use.

While we had been getting the guns, Grandfather had been locking the bedroom doors on the outside. Irene had left the keys in the locks, of course. Grandfather explained, as he finished that job, that if the man was hiding in any of those rooms he would stay there until we were ready for him, or break his neck trying to get out of a window.

Grandfather and I went down the back stairway. We found the door at the foot of it locked on the sitting-room side. (Irene had locked it earlier in the evening. That comes in her story. Perhaps I should have told her story to you first of all. But I think I shall do better if I try to keep to the order of events as they came to me.)

As Grandfather and I ran back upstairs, to go down

the front stairway, I happened to think that the door to the attic stairway had had no key, and that it should be locked. Grandfather told me that he had locked it with the key to my door. I am telling you this, in particular, to show you how quick, and fast, and straight Grandfather was thinking that night. But for him and his alertness some loophole might have been left, something might have been overlooked, as Dr. Joe persists. I know that with Grandfather directing as he directed all that night, nothing was overlooked.

- We made a thorough search of every inch of space downstairs. Then Grandfather insisted on going with Chris to search the cellar. He asked me to stay on the first floor with Aunt Gracia. She and I went all through the downstairs rooms and halls again, and found nothing. We went back upstairs to Olympe's room. She had revived, but had not got hold of anything as yet. She looked old, years older than Grandfather, lying there in her bed, asking over and over: "What is it? Why are you all up? What is the trouble?"

I thought that we should tell her. The others wouldn't let her be told. They said we must wait until she was stronger. Aunt Gracia skipped out to get some peach brandy for Olympe. I noticed, then, that Lucy was fingering a gun, fooling with it as she might have been fooling with a hairbrush. I went and took it away from her and asked her where she had got it.

"It was under Olympe on the floor when we picked her up," Lucy said. "I hadn't really noticed what it was."

It was Uncle Phineas's old .32 Colt's. I broke it. The

chambers were all empty; so it could not have been either harmful or useful.

Grandfather came upstairs. He said that he and Chris had found no one in the cellar, and no traces of anyone's having been there. He had left Chris downstairs, with Father's gun, guarding the lower floor. He said for me to go down and help Chris, while he searched the attic and the upper floor. I couldn't quite see Grandfather searching the most dangerous parts of the house, alone, while I went to squire Chris. Before I had time to object, Aunt Gracia, who had come back with the peach brandy, said nonsense. She would go down with Chris, if he needed someone, and I should go with Grandfather.

Since Uncle Phineas's old gun was in my hands, I hunted around and found some cartridges for it, and gave Grandfather's gun back to him. The attic was the same old story. We were pretty thankful up there for Aunt Gracia's housekeeping niceties. It was easier to search than the parlour had been. All the trunks, chests, and boxes against the wall—nothing but vacant spaces. Grandfather and I opened all the chests and trunks that weren't locked—that was all of them except Irene's three big trunks—and poked through all the boxes, big and little. The partitioned room up there was as clean and as empty as a dish in the cupboard. The bed covers were all put away, the mattress rolled back, the wardrobe open to air.

We came downstairs. But before we had unlocked a bedroom door, Chris shouted to us from the lower hall and asked us to come down.

He had got an idea, and a doggone good one. He had been to all the downstairs windows and doors. Each window sill had rolls of unbroken snow on it, and so had each of the three door sills. Unbroken, that is, except for the slight crumbling caused by Chris's having opened the windows and doors. He had put candles into empty cans—they throw a much better light than a lantern does, you know—and we used them at each downstairs window and door. Read this, Judy. Nowhere near a window, nowhere near a door, was there a footprint nor a break in the snow of any kind. As far as we could throw the light, say eight to ten yards at least, the snow was a clean unbroken sheet.

Put it like this, to make it clearer. The fellow had not got away before the shot was fired. If he had got away since, he would have had to leave some sort of tracks in the snow. There were no tracks in the snow. Ergo: he had not got away. Ergo: he was in the house.

I said, "He is right here in this house!"

Chris cursed and said that he was. "What's more," he added, "we'll keep him right here. I think we'll find a good use for him—later."

III

Well, Jude, I guess we kept him here. I guess he is still here with us. We spent all that night, or, rather, that morning, searching and re-searching the house and guarding to keep anyone from leaving it. No one left it. Up to the present, two o'clock Thursday morning, we have found no one in hiding here.

About four o'clock Tuesday morning Chris took a notion to go to Quilterville and inform the sheriff—Gus Wildoch still has the job, you'll remember—and telegraph to Dr. Joe. He started out of the back door down toward the barn. Irene stood in the doorway and yelped until she made Chris come back. I couldn't blame her much. Grandfather thought, too, that it would be wiser to wait until dawn.

When Chris came back, we tested our lights' efficiency on his tracks. They showed clearly. And, when daylight came, there they were—a deep line of woven footprints going part way to the barn and coming back to the house. Any other tracks, which had been made any time after the snow had stopped, around midnight, would have shown as plainly as those that Chris had made.

I didn't think of it at the time, but I believe now that that fact had something to do with curbing Chris's enthusiasm for bringing Gus Wildoch to the place. At any rate, instead of leaving at dawn, Chris yielded to Aunt Gracia's urging and waited for some of the hot coffee she was making.

Shortly after six o'clock we gathered about the table in the dining room. Lucy had finally crawled into bed with Olympe, and they had both got off to sleep about five; so, naturally, we did not disturb them.

Aunt Gracia poured Grandfather's coffee, passed it, and said:

"No one has left the place since Dick was killed last night. No one is hiding in the house at present. That

can mean just this: Whoever murdered Dick is in this house and is not in hiding."

How was that for a stunner, Judy, after the night we had all put in?

Irene stuttered something about not understanding.

Whether she did or not, and I'll bet she did, Grandfather and Chris and I understood right enough. For the first time in my life, I guess, I heard Grandfather's voice go harsh when he spoke to Aunt Gracia.

"My daughter," he said, "that conclusion is premature."

Aunt Gracia replied, "I'm sorry, Father; but I have been sitting quiet for hours, praying for guidance and thinking. I can reach no other conclusion."

We had tried to get her to stay in Olympe's room with Olympe and Irene and Lucy, but we could not keep her there. So, at last, we allowed her to sit in the lower front hall through the night. It seemed the safest place, since we had the front stairway door locked. We thought that no one would risk making a getaway through the front door. I gave her Uncle Phineas's old gun and I took my rifle. Grandfather stayed in the back of the house with his gun. Chris kept making a steady round of the house, using Father's gun. Chris and I changed places—I was in the upper hall—from three to four o'clock. At four, because she insisted, and because we felt certain there was no danger by that time, we allowed Aunt Gracia to make another thorough search with Chris. Irene, who had come out of Olympe's room when Chris had started for Quilter-

ville, tagged along with him and Aunt Gracia on this last search of theirs. Except for not whistling up Whatof and Keeper, which did not occur to any of us until they showed up for their breakfasts on Tuesday morning, I can't see that we overlooked a single bet. Can you?

Returning to our coffee-cup conversation, Grandfather said, in answer to Aunt Gracia's reply about thinking: "I have been thinking myself, dear—or attempting to do so. We have all been trying to think, I fancy. I, too, have reached but one conclusion: that constructive thinking is impossible for any of us, as yet. Minds in the states that our minds are in just now are illy working machines, Gracia. We'll do well not to rely on them, for the present."

"No, Father," Aunt Gracia actually said, "that won't do. Christopher is going, in a few minutes, to town for the sheriff. Before he gets here, with other outsiders, it is necessary for us to put our minds in order. Seven people were in this house last night after Dick was killed. No one could have left the house without making footprints in the snow. There are no footprints. We knew that in the night. This morning has proved it. There are no footprints. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, each one of us here knows that no one is hiding in this house. That brings us to this, and evasion is useless: One of us seven must be the person who killed Dick."

"Seven people, yes," Grandfather said. "But seven people all locked in their rooms. No judgment that does not take into consideration those locked doors, is sound."

Aunt Gracia said, "Six people locked in their rooms."

Judy, if she had smashed a bomb down on the dining table she couldn't have caused a worse explosion. I don't know what the others had thought about Irene being out, wandering around alone in the halls at midnight. I had not thought anything. I hadn't had time to give it a thought. Grandfather was right, as he always is, about our minds being broken machines that night and morning. Mine is yet, for that matter. I'd be crazy if it weren't for the order I was getting by writing this all out to you.

Irene began a bout of violent hysteria, screeching wedlock's warcry at Chris: "I told you so! I told you so!"

Chris lost his head completely. He cursed, and banged the table with his fists, and shook his long forefinger, arm's length, at Aunt Gracia, and shouted.

Grandfather stood up, straight, at the head of the table. Gosh, but he can tower! I'll remember him like that. He said to Chris, "Sir, restrain yourself, and comfort and quiet your wife." He turned to Aunt Gracia. "Daughter, explain to me the meaning of your last statement."

"But I thought you knew, Father," Aunt Gracia said, "that Irene was not locked in her room last night."

While Grandfather said: "I had not known that. I had thought that Christopher had been the first to succeed in opening his bedroom door, and that he had sent Irene to release us while he stayed with Dick," he kept on towering. Then he put his palms flat on the table and, slowly, sat down again in his chair.

Chris roared, "Uncle Thaddeus, are you going to sit calmly there and allow Gracia to accuse my wife of murder?"

Irene said: "She did it herself. That's why she is accusing me."

Yes, Judith, this conversation took place on the Q 2 Ranch, in the year 1900.

By some blessed miracle, Grandfather did not hear this speech of Irene's. He spoke to Chris. "I think Gracia made no such accusation, Christopher." And to Aunt Gracia, "You meant to make none, did you, Daughter?"

"No," Aunt Gracia answered. "I said, only, that Irene was not locked in her room last night. That she was in the hall, with the keys, and that she let us all out of our rooms. I think that circumstance should be explained."

Chris started up a lot of con talk about his wife doing no explaining. Grandfather said, "If you please, Christopher?" and little Chris subsided.

"My dear," Grandfather said to Irene, "if you will, please tell us exactly what occurred last night with reference to yourself. I ask for this, you all understand, not as an explanation of Irene's actions, but as a possible means for helping us all forward toward the truth."

Irene lifted her head from Chris's padded shoulder and looked first at Aunt Gracia and then at me. I felt as if she were clawing those light blue eyes of hers into my face. I thought: "She thinks I murdered Father," and looked up to see Grandfather following her stare. I met his eyes. They didn't claw, Judy. They did some-

thing worse than that. Just for an instant, before they looked away, they speculated—they doubted. You'll say I imagined that. All right. Remember the time we tried lying to Grandfather about the Evans kids' bob-sled? Did we imagine that look, that time?

Say, Jude, wouldn't it be horrible if a person could do some vile thing and then, from the shock of it, or something, forget about it right off? I mean—not know that he had done it. But Lucy was right in my room, within two minutes after we had heard the shot.

No matter. What I am trying to get to is Irene's story. This was the first time that any of us, except Chris, I suppose, had heard it. That is why I have waited to tell you. If I am to get this thing organized, at all, I'll have to keep the events in order as nearly as I can.

I think I'll step outside again, and get another whiff or two of cold air before I begin on Irene's story. I don't know how important it is, or may be. But I want to present it to you as clearly as I can.

CHAPTER XII

ONE thing I am bound to say for Irene: she was eager to tell what she knew. Chris did not wish her to tell. She insisted and got snaky with him for trying to stop her.

She said that, on Monday night, she couldn't sleep; so she got up—she thought it was then about ten o'clock, though she was not certain—put on her slippers and her wrapper, took a candle, and went downstairs to the sitting room. She said she was going to read, and she was afraid a light in the bedroom would disturb Chris. She said, also, that she was cold, and she thought the fire might still be burning in the sitting-room fireplace.

The fire was burning. She mended it, lighted the hanging lamp, and finished reading her book. She thought that it was close around eleven o'clock when she went upstairs again. The door to her room and Chris's was locked. She said that she and Chris had had a "trifling quarrel" before Chris had gone to sleep. She thought, in consequence, that he had misunderstood her reason for leaving the room and had locked her out. (That gives a fair notion of her perceptions. She'd been married to Chris for seven months, and yet she could fancy that he was capable of a cad's trick such as that. Chris is faulty, but he's no mucker.) She said that this made her very, very unhappy and a little bit angry.

She didn't desire the family to know that Chris could do such a thing; so without making a particle of noise, she tiptoed downstairs again and made a bed for herself on the sofa, with the Indian blankets.

Her next move was to pull the bolts on the doors to the front and back stairways. She did that because, she said, she felt sure Chris would feel ashamed of himself before long and come down and try to make it up with her. I guess she was pretty hot, all right, for she said she thought the bolted doors would show him that two could play at that lock-out game. Locked doors are a mania of hers, anyway. So is insomnia, though she sleeps until noon often enough. This trick of going downstairs to read was, as far as I know, a new one with her. I fancy the trifling quarrel was responsible for that.

After she had locked the doors, she blew out the light, got into her sofa bed, and settled for a long, comfortable weeping spell. Or, as she explained it, she lay down and cried herself to sleep.

She was wakened by the sound of the shot upstairs. The room Father had then—Chris's old room—is right above the sitting room, you know. She said she thought it was Chris shooting himself because she had been unkind to him. (She is the sort of woman to whom such an action would seem not merely reasonable but also admirable.) She jumped from the sofa, got into her wrapper and slippers, lighted her candle, ran through the rooms, unbolted the door to the front stairway, and ran upstairs. All the noises had begun up there, she said, before she had got the door unbolted. If anyone

had been running through the upper hall, or trying to come down the back stairway, there would have been no chance of her having heard him.

She started straight down the hall for Chris's and her room. She says she is sure she did not get hold of the idea, then, that we were all locked in our rooms. She said that she did hear Grandfather shout, "Let me out of here!" but she was too badly frightened to make any meanings at all.

She passed Olympe's room and Grandfather's room on her left, and Aunt Gracia's, and yours, and Lucy's on her right before she came to Father's door. It was standing open. The light was burning, so she ran in there. For the minute, and for the first time, too, she had forgotten about the exchange of rooms.

She said that, when she saw Father lying there in bed, it took her a minute to realize that he was not Christopher. Father was lying with his head tipped back on his pillows, and with blood streaming out over his nightshirt. She ran to him. She put her candle on the table there, and sort of lifted him in her arms. That was when she got her wrapper smeared with blood. She says he turned his eyes toward the open window and murmured, "Got away." At first, Irene was certain that Father had said, "Got away." But, when Aunt Gracia questioned her, she admitted that Father spoke indistinctly and that he might have said, "Go away." But I know that her best impression is that Father said, "Got away." Then, she declares that Father said, quite distinctly, "Red mask." There was no shaking her certainty about that. She said that he used his lips

to say it, and that she was watching them, and that she would swear that he said, "Red mask."

It stands to reason, Judy, that Father did not say "Red mask." Now what could he have said that sounds like red mask? Repeat it over to yourself. I have; but I can't get it. "Dead" sounds something like "red." "Dead past." That's senseless, isn't it? "May ask," sounds like "mask," and takes the lip pressure that Irene insists he made. But "may ask" is meaningless, isn't it? I can't get it. I am hoping that Lucy may be able to, later. She is such a little word wizard.

Irene knew that Father was dying. She thought that he had shot himself. She did not try to question him. We can't blame her for that. She wanted to do something for him, but she didn't know what to do. She attempted to ease his position; to stop the flow of blood with the sheets.

He said our names: "Neal. Judith. Lucy." She started to leave him, then, to bring Lucy and me to him. He said, more loudly than he had spoken before: "Wait. Father." She ran back to him, and he said, slowly and plainly: "Bring Father. I must tell *him*." He repeated, "Must tell Father." That was the end.

Irene declares that there can be no doubt about it: Father had something that he wished to tell Grandfather and no one else. It seems to me that can mean but one thing: Father knew who killed him. He was willing to tell Grandfather, no one else, who that person was. This would seem to preclude an outsider. Though there may be still some events in Father's past life of which we children have not been informed.

That ends Irene's story, in so far as Father is concerned. She left him, then, and ran to the door and back again to get her candle before going into the dark hall. On the table, beside her candle, and in the light ring from Father's lamp, she saw the keys lying scattered. Then, she thinks, for the first time she made the connection of the noise in the hall with the doors. That is reasonable enough—for Irene. She said she could not get the keys picked up. She kept dropping them. At last she put them in the pocket of her wrapper and, with her candle, came into the hall. Lucy's door is directly across the hall from Father's room, as you know. Irene poked one of the keys into the lock and unlocked it.

I asked her how she had known which key to use. She said that she had never thought of that. She took the keys from her pocket, one at a time, and each one fitted the lock she put it in. That is straight. The locks on the upstairs doors are all alike, and so are the keys. Chris made me go with him Tuesday while he proved this to me.

When Irene had finished telling her story, Tuesday morning, Aunt Gracia asked her why she had unlocked Lucy's door first. She added that Lucy was the one child in the household. It was stupid of Aunt Gracia to ask that, because Irene had just told us how it had happened. I didn't blame Chris for getting hot.

He said Aunt Gracia was assuming that Irene ran out of Father's door in full possession of all her faculties; that Irene was in a condition to stop and reason quietly about which door it would be wise to open first,

establishing orders of precedence, giving us all a rating as to age and importance. There was tragedy, Chris said. There was a duty for Irene to perform. She performed it, and she deserved high admiration for her composure and courage. We might, or not, give her that admiration, he said. But he would brook no word of criticism.

In a way, I agree with Chris. I wish Irene had got us out sooner; but I can see her position. Father was dying. She felt as if she should do something for him, right there, instead of rushing off and leaving him. When she did start to leave him, he called her back to him—that is, told her to wait. I don't like Irene. But I guess she did about as well as any of us younger ones would have done.

Aunt Gracia seemed to pay no attention to Chris's speech. Her next question was downright crumbly. She asked Irene why she had thought Christopher had shot himself, when she must have known that Christopher had no gun.

Grandfather settled that in a hurry. He apologized for Aunt Gracia; and then he explained to her that sudden fright, as she knew, precluded rationalization, and that it was natural that Irene's first anxiety should be for her husband.

Aunt Gracia said, "You haven't a gun, have you, Christopher?"

"Beginning already?" Chris was ugly about it. "No, Gracia, I have no gun. Have you?"

Aunt Gracia said: "No, I haven't. But that is an honest question, and you had a right to ask it."

"Irene," Grandfather said, "Christopher and Gracia were both locked in their rooms, were they not? You unlocked both their doors?"

"I did, Uncle Thaddeus," Irene answered. "I swear that I released every member of this family from a locked room."

It seems to me like this, Judy. Either we have to believe Irene's story, all of it, or we have to disbelieve it. I am here. I know her. I heard her tell it. I believe it, word for word.

Grandfather believes it, I know. In spite of her actions, I think that Aunt Gracia believes it. Or, perhaps I should say, against her own will, I think Aunt Gracia believes it. Chris must believe it. But here is the crumbly thing about Chris. Instead of saying flat, as I can say, that he knows Irene's story is true, he keeps trying to prove it.

He got me off and showed me, on Tuesday, that the fire had been mended after we left it the night before. He showed me the oil in the hanging lamp, nearly burned out. He has said, "Irene had no opportunity to get rid of a revolver." As if Irene could not have done all the things she said she had done—built the fire, burned the oil, made the bed, and then come upstairs later and fired the shot. She could have hidden the gun in the front of her wrapper, and have got rid of it since. Nobody searched her. The only important thing about any of Chris's "proofs" for Irene is that he thinks it necessary to hunt for them and use them.

On the square, though he is starring himself in the rôle of sleuth, Chris seems to me to be more off his screw

than any of us. But, perhaps, I haven't any right to say that. Chris told me that I should try to brace up, that Lucy, poor little kid, was worrying desperately about me. Grandfather told me that we must be careful for Aunt Gracia; that it seemed to him the tragedy was affecting her more seriously than any of the rest of us. Aunt Gracia thinks that Grandfather is harder hit than any of us. And, of course, Olympe is still flat in bed.

It is queer about Olympe. She must have heard the shot and jumped out of bed and fainted from fright. But she has no memory of having heard it at all. That shows the sort of tricks one's memory can play. When we found she didn't know what had happened, we didn't tell her until Dr. Joe got here yesterday, Wednesday morning. (I started this letter on Wednesday; but I've written all night, so it is four o'clock Thursday morning now.) Dr. Joe thought it better to break the news to her gently than to have her keep on fussing and worrying and asking questions. He told her. Leave it to Dr. Joe to take for himself, and put right through, any old disagreeable job that we are all afraid of attempting.

After our merry little breakfast on Tuesday morning, Chris rode to Quilterville to spread the news, send the telegram to Dr. Joe, and to send the crazy lying telegram, which he and Irene had composed together, to you.

Gus Wildoch and Hank Buckerman (he's coroner now) and a couple of other guys came out to the ranch with Chris. Gus and Hank were as decent as they could be, I guess, under the circumstances. The other guys went about issuing invitations to have their faces

punched in; but again under the circumstances—how handy those clichés are—I let them get away with it.

Grandfather took charge of Gus and Hank. Gus's attitude seemed to be that, if Grandfather would tell him what he wanted done, he'd do it. They stayed around about an hour, holding their sombreros like stomachers and shaking their heads, and then they left. Hank was much embarrassed because there would have to be an inquest. He kept apologizing to Grandfather about it. When Grandfather suggested that, perhaps, the inquest could be discussed later, Hank said sure, whenever we said, and, furthermore, it was nothing but a damn lot of red tape anyway.

Gus and Hank came out again to the ranch when Dr. Joe came, early Wednesday morning. Slim Hyde came, too, with his hearse. Dr. Joe had brought him because he, Dr. Joe, wished to take Father's body to Quilterville for an autopsy. Hank was a trifle worried about the inquest by this time, but Dr. Joe told him that the family would not be able to be bothered with anything of the sort for several days. The time was finally set for Friday morning. Queer, especially since old Hank is coroner, how I dread that inquest. If I were dog guilty, I couldn't dread it much more than I do. Hank was decent as could be about it. Insisted, again, that it was a mere formality, and advised Grandfather not to try to attend. Furthermore, he said, that went for any of us who weren't feeling up to snuff on Friday morning. All he needed, he declared, were one or two folks who could kind of tell a little about how things had happened.

Hank himself, as I nearly forgot to tell you, deduced a theory almost at once which satisfied him completely. Someone, he declared, had shot Father through the open window. Since it did not matter at all to Hank that there is not a tree of any sort near Father's room, nor that, unless the murderer had been equipped with wings, he should have had to stand on the porch roof to fire, nobody bothered to quarrel with Hank about it, nor about how the fellow had got the window open, nor any of it.

Dr. Joe stayed here until shortly after noon. He had his hands pretty full, what with attending the entire family, and interviewing and dismissing the busy-bodies who had been streaming up since the day before, like ants to a sugar bowl.

Chris and I could not see much reason for an autopsy. We knew that Father had been shot, and had died from that shot. But Dr. Joe was as stubborn as a mule about it; so we gave in. He and Slim took Father's body to Quilterville on Wednesday afternoon. It will stay there, now, until after the inquest, and then be brought home for the funeral, which, I believe, the folks have decided to have on Saturday.

I have kept at this all night, in order that you and I can start even. I want you to know, when you have read this letter, as much as I knew when I wrote it. I'll skip through it now and see whether I have left out any points. If not, I'll ride into Quilterville, as soon as Chris gets up at six, and mail this on number Twenty-two.

I find several points I have not made in connection

with Irene's story. As soon as she had heard the shot, she came through the downstairs rooms and up the front stairway. The door was locked, until she unlocked it. No one could have come downstairs the front way then, or she would have met him. The door to the back stairs was also locked, on the sitting-room side. Someone could have run down the hall and have hidden on the back stairway, or in the bathroom, which was unlocked. Someone could have gone to the attic. The door to the attic was unlocked. Then, while we were all in Father's room, just at the first there, he might have managed to sneak through the hall, which was dark, and past Father's door in spite of the fact that it was open, and get to some hiding place without any of us seeing him. Whatever his previous plans had been, they had not included one member of the family, not locked in a room, who could unlock the other doors. Nor, of course, had his plans included the circumstance of his being locked upstairs by means of the bolted stairway doors.

I know how this will be bound to seem to you: the problem was one of discovering some fellow hiding in the house. It would seem so to me, I am sure, if I were not right here. Judy, you'll have to take my word for it. No one was hiding in this house on Monday night or Tuesday morning. A human being, even a child, takes a good-sized space to hide in. There was not a foot of space, from cellar to attic, which we had not gone over with idiotic thoroughness before it was light on Tuesday morning.

I can see you sitting there and thinking of places

where we did not look. It won't go, dear. Yes, we looked in the old furnace and poked into it, though Lucy could not have crawled into the fire box. Yes, we have looked in the broom closets and the fruit closets. We have looked in the flour and sugar bins, and the wash boilers, and the churns, and the bureau drawers. We have looked as if we were hunting for a collar button instead of a man. And, remember, Aunt Gracia at the time, and since, has been over every square inch of the house. You know that she can always find any missing thing in this house more easily than we can find a word in the dictionary. Irene, I think it was—it sounds like her—who suggested secret passages and sliding panels. They would be convenient, wouldn't they?

The ground is still covered with snow. Except for the paths from the front and back doors, and the necessary paths to the barns and outhouses, and the tracks the dogs have made, the snow, as far as we can see, is clean and unbroken. That would mean, wouldn't it, that anyone who had left the house since Monday night had left it through the front or the back door? No one has stepped on the side porch, and the snow from that door to the yard is still unbroken. We could not keep the paths from getting beaten—people coming and going, all that. We have kept the outside doors locked, and Chris has the keys in his pocket. Nobody could pick those locks with a hairpin or a glove buttoner. We have kept Whatof chained by the front door and Keeper chained by the back door. You know, when those dogs have been told to watch, what they would do to some sneaking stranger.

After this, it hardly seems worth while to bother about telling you what Chris discovered when he was looking under Father's bed that night. But here it is. The bed had been moved three or four inches at the foot—pulled along over the carpet, I mean, as if some fairly hefty weight had been tugging on it. Chris keeps declaring that this must be of importance. How can it be important? Remember, the rope was covered with snow. The snow on the window sill and on the porch roof was unbroken. The snow makes it a certainty that no one had got out of that window during the past hour, let alone the past twenty minutes. Chris maunders about the rope having been used for some purpose before the snow-storm began. Irene suggested that the fellow might have come in that way. Lassoed the leg of the bed, first, I suppose, and then climbed right up.

I think that finishes it all then, except this. The folks here, for some reason, seem to be getting comfort from keeping you and Greg in the dark. Rather often somebody pauses to thank goodness that you two don't have to know the truth. I am not asking you to lie for me; but, on the level, I wish you would. Things are bad enough around here as it is, without having the folks all sore at me. In time, they will have to tell you the truth. If you could, until they get ready to do so, receive whatever hanky-panky they write to you, and not let them know that you are on, it would help me a lot.

I'll write you the truth every night—I'm night herding in the house at present. You can write what you please to me, of course. As I have said, I need the benefit of your thinking. Too, and again of course, you can

do as you please about giving me away. Perhaps I would better say, you can do what you have to do. It doesn't matter, really. What does?

Your loving brother,

NEAL.

CHAPTER XIII

I

Thursday night,
October 11, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: I said I'd write again to-night, so I shall, though I haven't much to add to what I wrote last night. All day I've been troubled with doubts about the wisdom of this writing. But I have started it, and you'll want the developments, and I need your help; so I'll keep at it for a while, at any rate. Particularly, I am sure, you will want news of the family.

They are all saying, now, how splendidly Grandfather is coming through. He has got the cane that Chris duded with in the East, and he totters about with it, defying any one of us to think that he needs to use it. Physically, he is a dead game sport. But, mentally, darn it, Judy, I don't know. Think this over. Is it like Grandfather to insist, in spite of everything, to insist without rhyme or reason, that someone sneaked in from the outside and killed Father, and got away again? No, sir, it is not like him. But that is what he is saying. I have decided that either Grandfather does think that I did it, and is putting up this con talk to

save me, or else that, mentally, Grandfather has weakened a bit.

That brings the interesting speculation as to whether or not Grandfather would try to save me. I know this about him. He is the finest, straightest, wisest man I have ever known. (If Father had lived, he would have been as great as Grandfather, in the end. But Grandfather had an edge on Father of thirty-odd years of living, and experiencing, and acquiring knowledge and wisdom.) Giving that character to Grandfather—or to any man—would he, if he felt fairly certain that his grandson had killed his own father, even by mistake for another man, try to cover traces, shield him, and allow him to go free? I think that he would. You know, Grandfather has always been strong for the idea of usefulness connected with morality and the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. He would think that, by saving me from punishment, he was saving the entire family from worse punishment. While my punishment would be a just one, theirs would be fearfully unjust. The family name would be disgraced. You and Lucy would be known as the sisters of a murderer—a parricide. Your children—had an uncle hanged. No, Grandfather would not stick that. A few months ago he wrote for Lucy, “Be generous, rather than just.” That is what he would do. He would let justice slide for me in order to be generous to the rest of the family. He would save me in order to save our standards, our traditions, and the other Quilters’ futures. And any one of us would do the same thing. I know it.

Olympe is still in bed. She quite simply lies there. I went in and talked to her a few minutes to-day. Unless the family stops this darn sentimental business of everyone trying to "spare" everyone else, we'll make a fine showing on Friday at the inquest. I asked Olympe, straight, how she supposed it had happened that Uncle Phineas's old gun was under her when the ladies picked her up from the floor.

She said that, since I was asking for suppositions, she supposed she had seized it—Olympe would never do less than "seize" a gun—and jumped from her bed before she fainted. It seems, when Uncle Phineas is away, that she always sleeps with his old gun under her pillow.

I told her that it had been unloaded. She said she knew it. She would have been afraid to sleep with the horrible, dangerous thing beneath her pillow if it were not unloaded.

Olympe's guns would always be unloaded, wouldn't they? As if her life were nothing but motions—useless things pretending usefulness; unrealities in the guise of reality. Her world is a stage, right enough, and she is more merely a player than it seems entirely moral for any living person to be.

She said she supposed it must have been the sound of the shot that frightened her, though she does not remember having heard the shot. (Dr. Joe says that is not at all unusual. That, often, when people faint from sudden fright, they do not remember the cause of their fright when they regain consciousness.) The last things that Olympe remembers are rubbing lotion on her

hands, getting into bed, and blowing out the lamp on her bedside table.

I think that her prostration now is by way of being distinctive. Sorry. That is a crumby way for me to write of Olympe. I am tremendously fond of her, and she knows it.

Aunt Gracia is doing only fairly well. She looks ill. Her grief has intensified her aloofness. Grief is the first word to use; but it is grief plus horror with Aunt Gracia. She is convinced that some one of us, right here in the house now, murdered Father on Monday night. As always, she manages to be the most useful member of the family. She would die for any one of us, I believe; but she hates to live with us—excepting, of course, Grandfather and Lucy.

Lucy, poor little kid, is hit hard. She is up and around, and she helps Aunt Gracia. But she looks—frightful. You'd hardly know her. That shocked expression is still on her face, sort of stuck on it, like a mask. She was too skinny, anyway, and I'll bet she has lost ten pounds since Monday night. She doesn't cry. She slips about, working, or staying close to Grandfather. She has stopped reading. She has stopped writing. When she isn't busy with the little duties Aunt Gracia finds for her, she huddles close to Grandfather—Chris says—or, when I am in the house, to me, and sits quietly with her tiny hands in her lap, and with that expression on her face. She took a tablet early this evening and began to write to you. She wrote about half a page, and then she walked across the room and tossed the

entire tablet into the fire. I know why. Lucy will not write lies. She cannot write the truth. So she has quit.

Irene and Chris, I think, have come through better than the rest of us. Irene dared to say that she and Christopher still had their "great love." All the rest of us, Aunt Gracia and Grandfather, Lucy and I, for instance, hate one another, I suppose. I should not suggest, though, that Irene is not affected, or that Chris is not. Irene cries most of the time. She is as shaky as an aspen, and hurt-seeming. She is not withdrawn, as Aunt Gracia is; but, poor girl, she gives the impression of trying to keep out of the way. I suppose grief is the most jealous and the most selfish of all emotions, and Irene senses it, even from Chris. We have no reason to expect her to feel as we feel, now; and since she cannot she is excluded and alone.

It is hard to write about Chris, or to understand him. He loved Father. He has something to endure that the rest of us haven't—remorse. He made the last few months of Father's life a hell on earth for him, and he knows it. When Chris thinks about our loss—he is white all the way through. But Chris, like the rest of us, has gone rather flooey. Judy, there is no good denying it—Chris is scared. And fear seems to make Chris rather yellow. I think it often does that to men and women.

Chris had got it into his head that, sooner or later, Irene is going to be blamed for this, because she was the only one who was not locked in a room on Monday night. So Chris has turned sleuth. An objectionable rôle

at best, and one that Chris plays badly. On the square, Judy, it is a case of protesting too much. As nearly as I can judge, the one thing against Irene is her husband's eagerness to prove that she is innocent. Everyone here except Chris knows that she is, without proof. I tried to give that to Chris to-day, but he would not have it.

He said it was charming of the family, but that after the inquest the law might step in. If it did, or when it did, he thought it would be well to have some proofs a bit more tangible, if less beautiful, than sweet family faith.

He has been rounding up these proofs of his since Monday night. If he has captured anything that is worth a cent for proof of anything, he has not informed me. This is the sort of thing he produces:

The rope—his informant was Aunt Gracia—had been in the attic for a year or more. It was bought to be used for a clothes-line. It was too thick for the clothespins to straddle, so it was put in the attic. This fact, that the rope was taken from our attic, Chris professes to believe is of enormous import. Remember little sentimental Lucy, aged four, when Uncle Phineas sneaked her off to the circus, inquiring as she watched the clown, "If he weren't tho thad, would he be funny?"

To-day, Chris has been directing his attention to the question of who locked us all in our rooms. I told him that meant, merely, that he was directing his attention to who murdered Father. Any boob would know that whoever did the one thing did the other. He essayed shrewdness with his "Perhaps."

"Well," she sort of mocked, "since the key was missing at nine o'clock, doesn't it seem odd to you that when, at eleven or thereabouts, Irene found the door locked against her, she should have decided that Christopher had locked her out?"

"Not at all," I said. "She was angry, and her feelings were hurt. Why should she stop to wonder about the key? The door was locked, wasn't it? Irene and I seem, at least, to have a feeling for facts in common. The door was locked. All right—Chris could have got up, found the key, and locked it, couldn't he? Keys aren't stationary things."

"Evidently not," Aunt Gracia said, without lifting her eyes from her sewing. "I've asked everyone but you, Neal. No one can say whether his key was on the inside or outside of his lock, that night, or whether it was missing entirely. Do you know about the key to your door?"

I didn't, of course. I hadn't touched the thing since she had put it in the lock, weeks ago.

"No one," she said, "in this house, ever touched keys, or thought keys, but Irene. Understand, Neal," she went on quickly, because, I think, she saw that her injustice was making me hot, "I do not think that Irene walked into Dick's room on Monday night and shot him. I do know this. We all know it. Irene was out in the hall that night, with the keys to all the doors. She could lock or unlock as she chose. She could have locked us all in our rooms. She could have spent the ten minutes or so, after we heard the shot, in Dick's room with him as she says she did, or she could have spent that

time in helping someone to escape, or hide, or——(Dick's last words, as quoted by Irene, particularly the "red mask" remark, did not carry conviction to me. Did they to you?) Then, when she was certain that her—shall we say friend?—her friend was safe, she could have unlocked our doors. Lucy's first—the child of the household.

"Fine!" I said. "Except that no one was hidden in the house, and that no one has escaped. Irene unlocked Lucy's door because it was straight in front of her as she ran from Father's room. If, as you've been hinting, Irene had planned with somebody to kill Father, would she have agreed to a plan that would put her in the position she is in now—that is, the only one of us who was not locked in a room?"

"Irene is stupid. She might have agreed blindly, if the person who did the planning was clever. But there is this, Neal. I repeat, I insist that Irene is stupid. Suppose, this seems more probable, that whoever planned to kill Dick did not tell Irene the truth about what he was planning to do. Suppose he made her believe that something else—no, I have no idea what—was going to be done that night. The rope might come into it there. And the snow probably spoiled some extra plan. No one could have reckoned on snow in October. In all my memory, snow in October has come just once before this—that was when I was a little girl. In other words, suppose that Irene helped, but unwittingly—as a dupe, a cat's-paw. That is possible, isn't it?"

"No," I said. "Irene couldn't keep a secret to save her life. If she had got mixed up in this, but was inno-

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"No one," she said, "in this house, ever touched keys, or thought keys, but Irene. Understand, Neal," she went on quickly, because, I think, she saw that her injustice was making me hot, "I do not think that Irene walked into Dick's room on Monday night and shot him. I do know this. We all know it. Irene was out in the hall that night, with the keys to all the doors. She could lock or unlock as she chose. She could have locked us all in our rooms. She could have spent the ten minutes or so, after we heard the shot, in Dick's room with him as she says she did, or she could have spent that

time in helping someone to escape, or hide, or——(Dick's last words, as quoted by Irene, particularly the "red mask" remark, did not carry conviction to me. Did they to you?) Then, when she was certain that her—shall we say friend?—her friend was safe, she could have unlocked our doors. Lucy's first—the child of the household.

"Fine!" I said. "Except that no one was hidden in the house, and that no one has escaped. Irene unlocked Lucy's door because it was straight in front of her as she ran from Father's room. If, as you've been hinting, Irene had planned with somebody to kill Father, would she have agreed to a plan that would put her in the position she is in now—that is, the only one of us who was not locked in a room?"

"Irene is stupid. She might have agreed blindly, if the person who did the planning was clever. But there is this, Neal. I repeat, I insist that Irene is stupid. Suppose, this seems more probable, that whoever planned to kill Dick did not tell Irene the truth about what he was planning to do. Suppose he made her believe that something else—no, I have no idea what—was going to be done that night. The rope might come into it there. And the snow probably spoiled some extra plan. No one could have reckoned on snow in October. In all my memory, snow in October has come just once before this—that was when I was a little girl. In other words, suppose that Irene helped, but unwittingly—as a dupe, a cat's-paw. That is possible, isn't it?"

"No," I said. "Irene couldn't keep a secret to save her life. If she had got mixed up in this, but was inno-

cent of any wrong intentions, she would have told Chris, either purposely or by mistake. It takes stouter stuff than Irene has to keep a secret at a time like this. If she had told Chris anything of that sort, he would have told us. You may, or may not, have a right to doubt Irene's honesty. You can't doubt Chris's—not in an affair of this sort."

"I can," Aunt Gracia said. "I do. I doubt everyone in this house, for one reason or another, except your Grandfather and, perhaps, Lucy."

That "perhaps" made me see red. "And yourself?" I said. I was a mucker for saying it as I did.

She answered me quietly: "No. Sometimes I doubt myself."

"That's all right," I said, "but you can stop doubting Lucy, here and now——"

"I have never thought," Aunt Gracia interrupted, "that Lucy walked into Dick's room and shot him. Don't be absurd, Neal."

"Whatever you thought about her," I said, "makes no particular difference. She was in my room within two minutes, within a minute, I should say, after the shot was fired. If you could have seen her then——" I was too sore to try to talk about it.

"Yes. I knew about her coming directly into your room, Neal," was what Aunt Gracia said with words.

I got up and put a log on the fire. I didn't dare trust myself to answer her.

After a minute or two, she went on talking. She wished that I would stop standing up for Irene. She said that it didn't matter what I said to the family:

but, when outsiders, people in authority, came to question me, she thought it unnecessary for me to make my defences of Irene so angrily and so staunchly. She finished by saying: "You don't like her, Neal. You have never liked her. You have said to me that you hated her. Why should you, now, take this attitude toward her? You resent even her husband's attempts to prove her story—resent them on the grounds that Irene never could, under any provocation, do an unworthy deed."

"Rot!" I said. "Look here, there is a difference between an unworthy deed, as you say, and murder—or even helping a murderer along."

"To be sure," she said.

I decided to answer her, this time. "Do you believe," I said, "that I murdered Father, and that Irene helped me?"

"I think," she answered, straight, "that Irene had to help either you, or Christopher, or Olympe—or someone from the outside who has eluded us. My clear thinking forces me to give up hope of an outsider. You notice that I have left out Father, myself, and Lucy. The madness of the past few days has, sometimes, made me almost doubt myself; but I know that is madness—nothing else. No one could doubt Father, or Lucy—I suppose."

"All right, Aunt Gracia," I answered—I can't explain it, but her saying that she had had moments of doubting herself was mighty good for me to hear—"let's look at it this way. What reason would Chris, or Olympe, or you—let's include you—or I have for kill-

ing Father? I mean, why would any one of us have done it?"

"Why does anyone ever murder?" she asked. "Because, since his mind has not become one with his Creator's mind, he can lose it—can be insane for a longer or shorter time. Why did Dick murder Enos Karabass?"

"Because he tried to assault Mother," I answered.

"So Dick said, and, I suppose—believed. Enos loved me. He worshipped me, I tell you. I loved—worshipped him. Our punishment came because we did worship each other, instead of our Creator. But, loving me as he did, and loving all women because of me, do you suppose— Oh, how mad of me to talk to you like this! No matter. I will say it. Dick was insanely, wildly jealous. You are Dick's son. But vengeance is the Lord's. If you did do this thing, I hope you may go free, as Dick went free; and that, before you die, you may be saved, forgiven, and ready to enter one of the highest states of glory, as Dick was ready."

I don't know why that didn't make me hot. It didn't. It was as if I'd had a curtain over a part of my mind, and Aunt Gracia's accusation had drawn it aside, and had shown me, in the light, that the dim, queer things I had sort of halfway feared myself, were—cobwebs.

My own relief, I suppose, made me capable of sympathy for her. I was dead sorry for her, and her doubts, and her poor, battered-up love affair. I tried to say what I thought might comfort her.

"It was a wonderful thing, Aunt Gracia," I proffered, "that, if Father had to die, he should have died so

soon after his baptism. That he could go, as you say, saved, forgiven, and ready for one of the highest states of glory——”

She interrupted me sharply: “Why do you talk to me like that? You don’t believe any of it, and I know that you don’t. What are you trying to do? Trap me?”

“Trap you?” I echoed like a fool. I didn’t get her at all. You know how I am, Judy. I can use the old bean all right, but it takes time—plenty and plenty of time. Mark Twain, wasn’t it, who said, “When in doubt, tell the truth?” I tried it. “I was attempting to comfort you, dear,” I said.

“No, you weren’t,” she rewarded me. “But you have. You have made me remember. Sometimes I forget. What you have just said is the meaning of it all. That is why I can endure it. Anything that has a meaning can be endured.”

She went away quickly, and left me alone. I have been sitting here, trying to think.

“Trap me,” she said. Can you beat it, Judy? You see her meaning, don’t you? Chris, as a sleuth, has done much talking about motives. If Aunt Gracia had wished to be sure that Father would attain one of those highest states of her glory—— You see? Before Father had had time to backslide. A motive for Aunt Gracia. But who would ever have thought of it but Aunt Gracia herself?

Isn’t she the queerest proposition? Just when we get to thinking that she is almost loony, she snaps around on us and is brighter than we are. No mind that was not in excellent working condition could have caught

me up like that, "What are you trying to do? Trap me?" in half a second.

Though, as you know, Judy, all this is rot. Suppose we got about it as Chris has been going of late. Suppose we try to put salt on the tails of nonexistent clues, and to materialize what Chris chooses to call "proofs" out of the air.

Aunt Gracia's voice was the one Lucy and I heard first, and all the time on Monday night, calling and calling to Grandfather from behind her locked door. Aunt Gracia has lived a good many years now with one of her high states of glory as her own objective. Would she sacrifice it for Father's sake? She would not. If she had been guilty, would she have revealed her motive, offhand, to me? She would not. All this, you understand, would be Chris's "proofs." Mine would be that I know Aunt Gracia. That I have known her all my life. That she is a Quilter—Grandfather's daughter and Father's sister. These are good enough proofs for me.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

CHAPTER XIV

I

Friday night,
October 12, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: We have been all day in Quilterville, attending the coroner's inquest. It was pretty bad. Worse than I had expected. Hank Buckerman was all right, decent as could be. But a fly guy from the district attorney's office was there, trying to show off—make a name for himself; Lord only knows what he was trying to do besides chivy us. His name is Benjamin Thopson. He put the screws on, right enough.

The men on the jury were John Skrope, Roy Ulander, George Houndel, Pete Garret, and a couple of Swedes that have just bought the livery stable Jim Murtaine used to have, down near the river. It was the Swedes, I'll bet, who kept the jury out so long. Two hours and ten minutes, Jude, while we hung around waiting, before they brought in their verdict: Died on the night of October eighth, from the results of a gunshot wound inflicted by person or persons unknown.

None of us said so while we were waiting. None of us has said so yet. But I know what I was afraid of, and I know what the others were afraid of: a verdict against Irene, or against Irene and Chris together. That is

what they would have handed us, Jude, just as sure as I'm living to tell it, if it had not been for Aunt Gracia. But I must tell you that later. It is early evening now. I have all night to write in. I want to give you the thing straight, from beginning to end.

I had never been in that courtroom before, and I know you have never been there. It is a dirty, dark hole of a place, with the windows too high and the ceiling too low. They kept the windows shut, and the big coal stove in the centre of the room blazing away, red hot all the way around part of the time, and eating up the air.

Hank, looking like a good-humoured eagle, sat up behind a desk where the judge sits during trials. This smart aleck Thopson and Bruno Ward—the Portland lawyer, you know, whom Father and Dr. Joe have been consulting since Mr. White died—and Mattie Blaine sat at a long table below and in front of Hank's desk. (Mattie had to take the whole works down in shorthand.) We Quilters sat together in a front seat, to the side. The remainder of the room was filled, chiefly, with canaille. While I was in the witness chair I had a chance to size up our audience. I was pleased to see how many people we knew had enough good taste and tact to stay away. None of the Beckers were there, and none of the Youngs. Chris said Tod Eldon was there with his wife, but I didn't see them. None of the Binghamms were there. But a quarter section of the room was filled with the Dunlapper tribe.

Dr. Joe testified first. Death was caused by an intrathoracic hemorrhage, due to a bullet shot into the

left chest. The bullet entered the left chest between the fifth and sixth ribs, pierced the pericardium without injury to the heart, traversed the lung, and lodged near the left scapula. (I've got this from Dr. Joe since then.)

Thopson asked, "Any possibility of suicide, Dr. Elm?"

Dr. Joe said, none. The absence of a weapon proved that suicide was impossible. Also, absence of powder burns showed that the gun had been fired from a distance of several feet.

Thopson asked Dr. Joe whether he knew what sort of gun had been used. Dr. Joe told him that he had recovered the bullet. That it had been fired, evidently, from a .38 calibre Colt's.

Thopson said: "You were present in the house at the time of the murder, Dr. Elm? You were among the first to discover the body?"

"No," said Dr. Joe.

"Your testimony, then, regarding the absence of a weapon near the bedside, was given from hearsay?"

Dr. Joe said, "If Dick had had a gun in his hand when they found him, the absence of powder burns, and the position of the bullet, and the whole thing would prove that he couldn't have shot himself—if that's what you're getting at."

Thopson said he was through with the witness. Hank excused Dr. Joe and called Irene to the stand.

The procedure, after that, was to call the witness, swear him or her in, ask the name in full, where they lived, what the relationship was to the victim, that

sort of thing, and then Hank would say, "Tell the jury what you know about the shooting."

Irene seemed delicate, and pretty, and out of place stuck up there in that dirty old hole.

She told her story straight, just as she had told it to us at home. Except she said that, when she found the door locked she thought that Chris was trying to play a joke on her. She omitted their quarrel, you see—good job, too—and the part about having cried herself to sleep.

Thopson led off by asking, "Is your husband in the habit of locking you out of your room at night, for a joke?"

Irene said, "No, he isn't."

"How many times has he locked you out?"

"He has never locked me out."

"What gave you the idea, then, that it was a joke?"

Irene said, "It could have been nothing else."

"It wasn't a joke, though, in the end, was it?"

"It proved not to be. It also proved not to have been my husband who had locked the door."

"It never occurred to you to knock on your own door and find out why your husband was—er—playing this joke on you?"

"I did not wish to disturb the family."

"Very considerate. A light rap, with a dainty hand, on your own door, would have aroused and disturbed the entire family, you think?"

Mr. Ward jumped up. "Mr. Coroner," he said, "this is a deliberate baiting of the witness, and a waste of time. This lady has explained that, though she thought

the locked door was a joke, she was not entirely in sympathy with it. Mr. Thopson questions because she did not pound on the door like a vixen. It depends, I suppose, upon one's experience with ladies. This lady slipped quietly away, arranged, as she has told us, a neat little retaliation, and went to sleep."

I had thought that Dr. Joe was making a sucker play when he had got Mr. Ward to come over from Portland. I changed my mind. Mr. Ward wasn't particularly brilliant, not one, two, three compared to Aunt Gracia, but he was as useful as a left leg. Whenever this fly Thopson would get too smart, Mr. Ward would jump up and appeal to Hank, and Hank would shut Thopson off. Then, if Thopson started hollering about it, Hank would inquire: "What's eating you, say? This ain't a trial."

Perhaps it wasn't a trial. But it came too close to being one to suit me. Though, in another way, a real trial might have been better. Right at the beginning, if Mr. Ward could have defended Irene, it would, at least, have carried the enormous advantage of straight dealing. He couldn't defend Irene, because no one had accused her. What he was fighting was the accusation. But he had to hide even that.

He played the rope, which the fiend had been afraid to use, and the weapon that the fiend had carried away with him, hard and fast. The trouble, or the chief trouble was, I think, that he did not believe in them himself.

Thopson chivied Irene, next, on what he called "the victim's last words."

Irene had told that Father had said, "Got away," and then, "Red mask."

"You think the victim meant to indicate that some person, wearing a red mask, had got away?"

"I don't know what the words indicated. I only know that he said them."

"You have, perhaps, thought of some other meaning that the words were meant to convey?"

"No, I have not."

"You have given the matter no thought whatever?"

Mr. Ward stopped that. He asked whether the purpose of this investigation was to discover the facts of the case or to allow Mr. Thopson to torture a grief-stricken lady. He said that, clearly, Richard Quilter's last words had meant to indicate that the man who had murdered him had been masked, and had escaped. Knowing, Mr. Ward said, that the family's chief future concern would be to apprehend the fiend who had committed this heinous crime, Richard Quilter had, in spite of the fact that he was a dying man, done his best to aid his dear ones with the frightful task which he knew, even then, would soon devolve upon them. "His duty, first, gentlemen, though Richard Quilter performed it from the edge of the grave. Duty done, he called for his children, for his aged father——" On and on. But Ward was no fool. Remember, Judy, the men who were on the jury. Ward was merely heating his wind for the shorn lambs, as it were; or, at least, that was the way I sized him up.

Thopson asked Mr. Ward, directly, if he thought that red masks were the customary apparel for murderers.

Mr. Ward said, "Dying men don't lie, Mr. Thopson."

Thopson said, "No. Dying men do not."

But I think that went high over the heads of the jury.

Thopson then began on the keys. How had Irene happened to see them there on the table?

"They were directly under the lamp and beside the candlestick I had put down."

"And what gave you the assurance that those particular keys were the keys to the bedroom doors?"

"Nothing gave me that assurance. At last I understood what the noise in the hall must have meant—was meaning, that the others were locked in their rooms. I saw keys there. I took the keys and went to unlock the doors."

"Very well. How long would you say it was from the time you heard the shot until you happened to see the keys on the table, put them into your pocket, and went and unlocked the doors?"

"The others say it was about ten minutes—or a bit longer—after the shot was heard, before I unlocked the first door."

"I am not asking you what the others say. I am asking you for your own opinion."

"I should have thought it was longer than that."

"Time passed slowly, dragged, between the time of the shot and the time to unlock the doors?"

Irene didn't get it. I think the jury didn't, either.

"It seemed a long time," she answered.

"During this long time," Thopson said, "did you make any search, near the bed, for the weapon you thought the victim had used to kill himself?"

"No. I was very much frightened and shocked. I did not know what to do."

"Were any weapons—any guns, that is—discovered later in the house?"

"Dick's own gun was in the closet of his room. But the closet was a long distance from the bed. The gun was on a high shelf, behind some boxes, and it was found fully loaded."

"That was the only gun in the house?"

"No. There were others. But they were all locked in the rooms with the people who were locked in."

"Through with witness," Thopson said, and sat down.

They called me next, swore me in, and so on.

I told my story; just about what I have written to you, though in less detail. How I had heard the shot, jumped out of bed, tried the door—— I was scared stiff, Jude. I thought, after what Thopson had given Irene, when she was a lady and a pretty one, there was no imagining what he might do to me. When I stopped talking and he said he was through with me, and Hank said, "Witness excused," I was so amazed that I kept right on sitting there until he said again, "Witness excused."

They called for Lucy, next. But Grandfather had not allowed her to come. He said that it was no place for her, that she was not physically fit to go through with anything of the sort, and that, since someone must stay at home with Olympe, Lucy should stay.

Mr. Ward said, "Mr. Coroner, Lucy Quilter, a little girl, twelve years old, ill herself from shock and grief,

is not in the courtroom. I may add that she is at home attending her aunt, who is seriously indisposed."

"And furthermore," Hank said ("furthermore" is one of his pet words, you know; he pronounces it "futther-more"), "anybody who tries to start anything about that little motherless and fatherless child being kep' at home where she belongs, will find theirselves in a contempt of court—or worse."

He called Chris as a witness.

II

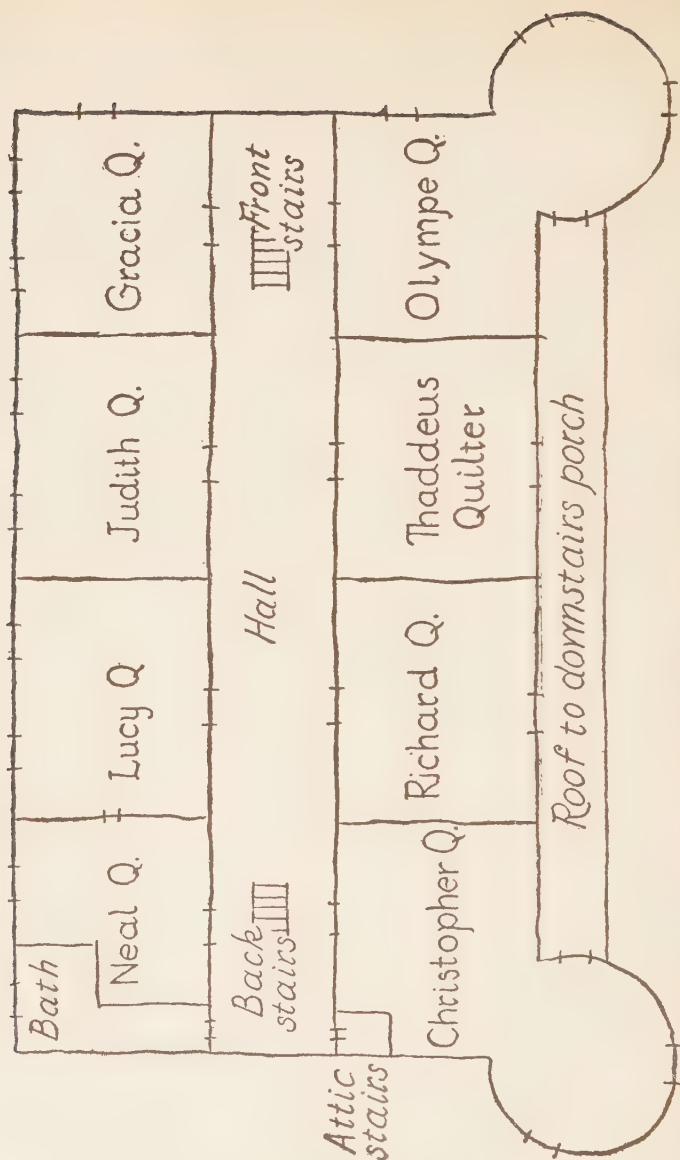
Chris told the same story. He had heard the shot—so on. All the same—his fright, the noises we were making.

About then one of the Swedes got a bright idea. He wanted to know if there weren't any windows in our house, and why none of us had tried to get out of our room by way of the window.

Chris told him that the rooms across the front of the house had windows out on to the sloping roof of the downstairs porch, but that the windows across the back of the house faced a sheer drop of close to thirty feet.

Mr. Swede then decided that he had to have a plan of the upstairs rooms drawn on the blackboard, right then and there. Hank asked one of us to draw it. Who volunteered? Who would? Aunt Gracia, of course. It looked about like the sketch that I enclose.

Some fools tittered. I could have killed them. She had no ruler, and the sketch was shaky, of course. But it



Gracia Quilter's Sketch of the Second Floor

was plain enough, and gave the Swede exactly what he had wanted. That is, it showed that Chris, or Grandfather, or Olympe could have got out of a window and gone along the porch roof to Father's room.

Thopson asked Chris why he had not done just that.

Chris said: "I was out of my mind with fright. My wife was missing from our room. Someone had been shot. I could tell from the noises that others of the family were also locked in their rooms. My one idea was to get my door opened. Possibly, in another five minutes or so, the idea of the window might have occurred to me. I don't know. I know that I did not, at the time, give a thought to the window."

Mr. Ward went to the blackboard and marked more plainly the situation of the window with regard to the roof—showing the distance, about five feet, of Chris's cupola window from the roof. He drew a slanted line, to indicate a third pitch roof. He made a speech, trying to convey the impression that any thought of the roof, in connection with the case, was an absurdity. I don't know about the jury, but I do know that I remained unconvinced.

You understand, Judy, I am not slurring at Chris, or anything of the sort. But it is doggone queer that he did not think of that window at all. What I really believe about it is this: Physically, Chris has always been something of a coward. Three months ago I'd have denied moral cowardice for him; but his planning to sell us out because Irene nagged him, makes me less inclined to that denial. You remember the time Chris didn't pull Lucy out of the river when she had a cramp?

The time you jumped in with all your clothes on, and did? And the time he fell out of the cherry tree into a hammock and fainted from fright, though he wasn't even bumped? It seems a lot more probable to me that Chris did think of the window—that he looked out of it. The fact that a man doesn't drop out of a window on to a slippery, slanted porch roof, at night, by no means makes him a murderer. There are different sorts of courage. Chris married Irene and brought her home to Q 2.

I was afraid that Chris was in for a bad few minutes concerning the window; but while Mr. Ward had been talking, Pete Garret had, apparently, laboured. He brought forth a mouse. He asked Chris why he had locked Irene out of the room.

Chris said, "I did not lock my wife out of the room."

Mr. Ward reminded the jury that the key to Chris's door had been found, along with the keys to the other locked doors, on the table in Father's room.

"The fiend," said Mr. Ward, "having no idea that this little lady was below stairs, had locked that door, when he locked the other doors, in order to make sure of the time required to effect his escape."

I don't know why Thopson had waited so long to take up the subject of footprints. I imagine a good look at the jury had decided him not to crowd them with ideas. Though Mr. Ward had missed no opportunity to mention escape, Thopson had stopped Irene's story, and mine, when we had come to the place about rushing into Father's room after Irene had unlocked the doors.

"Mr. Ward," Thopson said to Chris, "keeps mention-

ing the escape of the criminal. Will you tell the jury, Mr. Quilter, exactly how you think this escape was made?"

Chris said, "I have no idea as to his method of escape."

"Mr. Ward has made repeated mention of a rope hanging out of the open window of the victim's room. Will you please give us the exact situation of that rope?"

Chris told them what I have written to you.

"Do you agree with Mr. Ward that this rope was not used as a means of escape?"

"Yes, I agree."

"Will you tell us why?"

Chris told them.

"Now, Mr. Quilter, will you please tell the jury where you did discover footprints that you had reason to believe were made by the escaping criminal?"

Chris is a good looker, all right, Judy. I wasn't ashamed of him, sitting up there so clean and so alien to that dirty hole, answering the questions in that low, educated voice of his.

"There were no discoverable footprints," he said, "anywhere about our grounds."

"Indeed? That makes your perplexity, your—er—vagueness about his method of escape readily understandable."

"Nevertheless," Chris inserted, "that he did find some method of escape is evinced by the fact that he has not been found in hiding in our home."

"You all searched the place pretty well, I suppose?"

"We have searched repeatedly, and with absolute thoroughness."

One of the Swedes spoke up, in that slow, drawling, damnable way they have, "Yoost a minute, Mr. Coroner. Maaybe the fella is in the Quilter house yet, but not hiding behind a door—aye?"

Hank said, "Say, get tired, can't you? You guys don't seem to understand the offices of this here inquiry. What we're here for ain't to put up a lot of tall talk. Futthermore, it is to find out how the dirty son of a sea cook got into the Quilter mansion and killed Dick Quilter—one of the squarest men that ever lived—and got away. We've got time, sure. But, at that, we ain't got all week, either, to set here and listen to you guys beef about what ain't got anything to do with the offices of this inquiry. Futthermore, witness testified that there weren't no footprints they could find. Well, then, either they overlooked the footprints, the which would be easy enough on a place of that size, or else the guy hid in the house somewheres. Futthermore, to sit here and yappy-yap about him not hiding behind a door is wasting everybody's time. Nobody said he hid behind a door, did they? Shut up! I'm talking, ain't I? Present witness excused. We'll ask Mr. Quilter, Senior, to take the stand, if he feels able. And we'll try to listen to him with the respect his years merit, to say nothing of his attainments. Shut up! Am I coroner of Quilter County, or ain't I? Am I supposed to run these proceedings, or had I better quit and turn them over to a rah-rah boy? Thank you, Chris. You done fine. Now, then, Mr. Quilter, if you'd as lief take the stand?"

I got that speech straight from Mattie's notes. She and I were talking together while we were waiting for

the verdict. She's a good kid. I'll admit that I was sort of assuming the light and airy for her benefit—self-defence, Judy, not orneriness; I can't advertise my reserves—and I said that speech of Hank's was a classic, and that I'd like to have it to preserve, word for word. She said, "I'll copy it from my notes for you," and sat down and got to work. An hour later, she came up with a bunch of papers, torn from her notebook. "I thought you might like to have Miss Quilter's testimony, too," she said. "She was so wonderful," and she handed me the papers and skipped. It made me sort of think that somebody must have told her about me pushing Lump Jones's face in for him, the night of the Youngs' straw ride. Gosh, but that seems twenty years removed from this afternoon, and Grandfather's having to take the witness stand, and be questioned.

III

Except for his manner of telling it, Grandfather's story was not very different from Chris's or mine.

He had been wakened from his sleep by the sound of a gunshot. (I think Grandfather called it a revolver shot.) He had been mightily disturbed. He had lighted his lamp, risen from his bed, and gone to the door. He had found it locked—a circumstance that greatly increased his anxiety. He had donned his dressing gown and slippers. He had looked about him for a key, and he had made various futile attempts to open his door without it. He had gone to his window and opened it—had perceived that snow had fallen. Caution, which his

increasing years had put upon him, had warned him against the folly of attempting to retain his balance on the sloping, snow-covered roof. He had turned again to his room, in search of some heavy implement with which to batter down his door. He had been unable to find anything of the sort. The turmoil made by other members of the family in their varied attempts to open their own doors had materially abetted his own agitation. Several times he had heard his daughter Gracia's voice, calling to him from behind her locked door, to ascertain the state of his welfare. He had answered, but had seemed unable to reassure her. Finally, after what had seemed an interminable period of time, he had heard the welcome sound of running feet in the hall. Shortly after that, his niece, Mrs. Christopher Quilter, had unlocked his door.

She had said to him his son's name, "Dick!" and had hastened up the hall.

He had gone at once to his son's room. His nephew, Christopher, and his son's children, Lucy and Neal, had been in the room when he had reached it. His son was dead. "Gentlemen, I invite your questioning."

Thopson came clear off his perch and asked Grandfather, most respectfully, whether he knew of anyone who would benefit by the death of Richard Quilter.

"Sir," Grandfather answered, "my son's death, far from proving a benefit to any living person, has and will prove a severe loss to many. I am speaking now merely of material loss. My son was the manager of Q 2 Ranch. On his ability and acumen the fortune of our entire family largely depended."

"I had heard," Thopson said, "that there had been some talk of selling the Q 2 Ranch."

"My nephew, Christopher, had been approached with offers of purchase. Up to the present time, he has accepted none of them. However, is that not beside the point? Had the present Quilter properties been sold, others would have been immediately purchased as an estate for the family. My son's services would have been more necessary, if possible, on the new ranch than they have been on the old."

Roy Ulander spoke up from the jury. For a minute, when he began to speak, I was crazy mad, remembering all Grandfather had done for him, and thinking that Roy was going to quiz him. I was mistaken. Roy took that minute to attempt to console Grandfather. He said that he knew Neal and Phineas and he—Grandfather—would be able to carry the ranch along all right. He added, not wholly to my delight, that I was a good, steady lad and a fine worker, with an old head on young shoulders.

Grandfather thanked him.

Thopson wanted to know whether Father had left a will.

Grandfather said that he had not.

Thopson commented, "Very strange."

Grandfather begged leave to differ with him. He explained that, aside from Father's modest personal effects, Father had nothing to will to anyone.

"No life insurance?"

"None, sir," Grandfather said.

"I see." But Thopson managed to put into those two

words a commentary, caustic, on the character of a man who ventures to die without life insurance.

Grandfather rebutted with the information that, until 1893, both he and Father had carried large policies. Since that time, Grandfather said, they had been unable to keep up the premiums.

Thopson grew faintly argumentative. He stated that the better companies carried their policy holders for several years.

"As did our company, sir, for six years," Grandfather replied.

Thopson observed that it was difficult for him to understand why a family, who had ample means for all the luxuries of life, including education in Eastern universities, foreign travel, and what-not, could not afford the necessity of keeping up small life-insurance premiums.

"The premiums," Grandfather informed him, "amounted to well over fifteen hundred dollars a year. However, my understanding is, that the purpose of this inquiry was to discover, if possible, where, when, and by what means Richard Quilter came to his death. That its purpose was not to inquire into the details of our domestic financial managements and expenditures."

"Precisely, Mr. Quilter," Thopson accepted. "Precisely. Our purpose is to discover, as you have said, where, when, and by what means Richard Quilter came to his death. Now, Mr. Quilter, I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, that you more than anyone else in this room are desirous of discovering, also, the person who is responsible for the death of your son.

May I, then, offer you the results of my experience?" (Hot lot of experience that guy has had. He is still downy.)

His question, of course, was rhetorical. But Grandfather answered it, when Thopson stopped to breathe.

"You may, sir."

"In cases of this sort, the logical approach is to find, if possible, the reason for the crime. That is to say, before we can discover who committed the crime it is necessary to discover why the crime was committed. Now, if your son had left money to some person, there we would have what we professional men call a motive for the murder."

"You have made yourself clear," Grandfather said. "However, unfortunately, perhaps, for you professional men, my son left not one cent on earth."

"You are positive of that?"

"No, sir."

"You aren't?"

"No, sir. I am confident of it. I am positive of nothing."

"Then," Thopson produced, "perhaps it won't surprise you greatly when I tell you that Richard Quilter did leave a neat little sum of money."

For one flickering instant Grandfather exposed his complete stupefaction to the rabble. Then, as he often does, he built a blind of his Johnson and got behind it.

"You do not surprise me, sir. You do astonish me. Proceed, if you please, to enlighten me."

Up to this time, as I have said, Thopson had been as decent as a mucker of his sort could be toward Grand-

father. But now that he was to enlighten, he assumed an oily, confidential, between-you-and-me manner that made me have to hang on to my chair to keep from lifting myself out of it and giving him a swift kick. Chris, who was sitting between Irene and me, saw that I was getting hot, I think, because right then he caught hold of my arm with a firm grip.

In this new manner of his, Thopson informed Grandfather, and all of us, that, by the merest chance, he had discovered that Father had carried an accident policy for the past eight years. A friend of Thopson's was an underwriter for the firm that Father had been insured with. This agent—that's a good enough word for me—had told Thopson that, if Richard Quilter's death proved to be accidental, their company would have to pay the heirs ten thousand dollars.

"Sir," Grandfather said, "I can but wish that your informant had been himself correctly informed. My son did carry such a policy. Unfortunately, it was allowed to lapse only last year."

Thopson forgot himself. "Not on your life it wasn't. The premium was only forty dollars a year. If Richard Quilter himself didn't keep up the payments, then somebody else has kept them up. Undoubtedly, some member of the family. Now, if we can find who made the last payment——"

Dr. Joe stood up. "I made that last payment," he said, and sat down.

Thopson chose to get suddenly solemn. "Mr. Quilter, were you aware of the fact that Dr. Elm had made this payment?"

Hank said, "Don't answer him, Mr. Quilter. You've told him once. If he's deaf, we can't fiddle-faddle around with him all week. Furthermore, he's a waste of time."

"Mr. Thopson," Grandfather said, "I was not aware of the fact that anyone had made the payment. My belief was that the policy had been allowed to lapse."

"Mr. Quilter, can you give any reasonable explanation of the fact that your son had not told you of Dr. Elm's having paid this premium?"

"I trust, sir," Grandfather replied, "that I should not attempt an unreasonable explanation. I give you what seems to me a most reasonable one when I state that I fancy my son was not cognizant of the fact that his friend, Dr. Elm, had met this obligation for him."

And again Thopson forgot himself. "You mean he didn't know it? You bet he knew it. Last August he went to the company's office, in Portland, and tried to collect damages for a sprained wrist, or something."

Dr. Joe stood up, emphatically.

Thopson said, "One moment, Dr. Elm."

Hank said, "Go on ahead, Doc, if you've got something to say."

Dr. Joe said, "Oh—plenty of time."

"Mr. Quilter," Thopson had retrieved himself, solemnly and all, "would ten thousand dollars make any particular difference to anyone on the Q 2 Ranch at the present time?"

"The answer to the question, which I infer you are trying to put, is: Yes, sir, it would."

"To whom?"

"To all of us."

"Then," Thopson shot out, "if this ten thousand dollars is collectible, every person on the Q 2 Ranch at present would benefit because of it?"

"That is true," Grandfather said.

Thopson said he had finished with the witness. Mr. Ward stood.

"Mr. Quilter," he asked, "in all matters you were your son's confidant, were you not?"

"So I believed," Grandfather answered.

"Since he had not told you that this policy was still operative, is it probable that he had told any other member of the family?"

"It would seem not. However, I cannot be certain. My son had never attached importance to that policy. He believed that the company was an unreliable one. My son's failure to tell me of Dr. Elm's kindness might have been because he knew of my dislike for monetary dealings with our friends. It might have been that so trivial an episode passed out of his mind. Or, it might have been that Dr. Elm himself asked Richard not to mention his act of kindness. In any of these events, it would seem unlikely that Richard had mentioned the affair to any other member of the family. I have expressed myself poorly. My meaning is, that the same considerations which would have kept Richard from telling me of this would have kept him, also, from telling anyone else."

"Thank you, Mr. Quilter. One more question, if you will be so good. You have told Mr. Thopson that your family would benefit from the payment of the ten thousand dollars' indemnity. There are few families, I

should think by the way, to whom ten thousand dollars would be of no benefit whatever. The same question, put to any member of the jury, would, I am certain, be answered as you have answered it. My point is this: Would the money, for any reason, be more acceptable to you now than it would have been at any time in the past ten years? Or, to put it still more clearly: One year ago your son's life was insured for a large amount—twenty, thirty thousand dollars. Would not thirty thousand dollars have been more useful to Q 2 Ranch than ten thousand dollars?"

You see what he did, Judy? He asked the first question, and then he would not allow Grandfather to answer it. He kept right on going. And the question which Grandfather finally had to answer was: Which is the larger amount, ten or thirty thousand dollars?

Do you know why Mr. Ward did that? I know. It was because he believes that one of us Quilters is guilty. It is because he was afraid of Grandfather's honesty.

I thought that Grandfather might scorn the loophole. He did not. He answered, "Sir, thirty thousand dollars would surely have been more useful to the Q 2 Ranch than a problematical ten thousand dollars. I may add, that my son's life insurance was with an old, reliable company. Have I correctly answered your question?"

"You have; and thank you, Mr. Quilter."

I told you why Mr. Ward had asked the question as he had. I think I don't need to tell you why Grandfather answered it as he did. Or, perhaps I should say, I have told you before this why Grandfather answered it as he did.

Grandfather came back to his seat beside Aunt Gracia. Dr. Joe was called to the stand.

IV

Thopson elected sternness. "Dr. Elm, where were you on the night of Monday, October eighth?"

"I was attending Mrs. H. F. Ferndell, in Portland, Oregon. She gave birth to an infant daughter at one o'clock in the morning."

"You can, of course, produce witnesses to substantiate this alibi?"

"Not an alibi," Dr. Joe said, with perfect gravity. "A birth."

"You can prove that you were where you claim at have been on the night of Richard Quilter's death. And allow me to remind you, Dr. Elm, that this is no place to indulge in forced witticisms."

Dr. Joe said, "How does it go? "'There's nae ill in a merry wind,' quo' the wife when she whistled through the kirk.' Well, get on. Get on!"

"I have asked you whether you could prove that you were where you claim to have been in Portland, on the night of October eighth."

"I don't know. There were two grandmothers, three or four uncles and aunts, the father, the patient, and, of course, the infant. The whole thing hinges on whether or not those people could be got to confess that they had me for their physician. I should say it was doubtful. Oh, get on, you—you. Of course I can prove it."

"Very well. Will you, then, tell this jury how it hap-

pened that a man in your circumstances should have undertaken to keep up an insurance policy for another man?"

Dr. Joe said, "I paid my board bill last month. Did you?"

Thopson turned to Hank. "Mr. Coroner, I appeal
_____,"

Hank said, "He asked you a civil question. Can't you answer it?"

One of the Swedes found voice. "Maaybe, I tank the doctor he don't want to tell about paying oop the insurance."

Dr. Joe said, "Sure, I'd just as lief tell. I was out at Dick's house, early last year, when the bill came for his premium on this policy. Dick said that he thought he would drop it—that it was a shyster company. And it was—there's something else I can prove, Mr.—What's-your-name—though I didn't know it at the time. I had a policy of my own with the same company. I told Dick I thought it was foolish to drop a thing like that, for forty a year. He said forty was too much to waste, and that he had spent his last available cent for the month, anyway. I asked him to let me pay it this year—said he could count it against what I owed him."

"You were in debt to the deceased?"

"Yes. To him and his family."

"What was the amount of this debt?"

Dr. Joe said, "I was afraid I might be asked that, so I reckoned it up in cold figures here lately. It came to a million and four dollars and twenty cents. Or, though likely you won't understand, I am in debt to these

people for friendship, for a place that feels like home, for——”

“It is not a question, however, of actual monetary debt?”

“No, I don’t suppose you’d think so. Well, anyhow, I asked him to let me send the check in for him this year, or until he was in cash again.

“He refused, point-blank. And there, as he thought, the matter ended. When I left the ranch, I swiped the bill; and, later in the month, I sent in a check with a letter telling the company to be sure to send the receipt to me. Warning them, under no circumstances, to send it to Q 2. Consequently, they mailed Dick the receipted bill in the next mail.

“In the meantime, he had told Mr. Quilter here that he had decided to allow the policy to lapse. Mr. Quilter agreed with him that it was as well to have done so. Time will probably prove that he was right about it. He usually is.

“When Dick got the receipted bill, he knew what I had done. I can’t say that he was particularly grateful to me. He insisted that I take his note—all that sort of stuff. He said that he wouldn’t say anything to his father about it, because his father hated being under obligations to friends. I told him he had better not tell his father. Threat—you see. I guess that ends the story.”

Dr. Joe started to walk away. Thopson winged him with: “One minute, please. Did the deceased tell any other member of his family about this somewhat unusual proceeding?”

"They are here," Dr. Joe said. "Do you want me to ask them?"

Hank said, "This ain't a trial. I'll ask them. Save time. Miss Quilter—never mind leaving your seat for a little informal matter like this—did you know Dick had this fake accident policy?"

Aunt Gracia said that she had known of it, several years ago. But that Father had told her, when he had told Grandfather, that he had decided to let it lapse.

"What about you, Neal?" Hank asked.

I told him I had known nothing about it. I had known that Father was all cut up about having to let the life insurance go; and I had supposed that it left him entirely uninsured.

Hank began to ask Chris, next; but Thopson got funny and said that he insisted on having these answers under oath. I didn't think Hank would allow him to get away with it, but he did. I suppose he had to.

Thopson took Irene first. He asked her whether she had known about the policy. She said that she had not. The witness was excused.

Chris was called, and sworn in. "Yes," he said, "I knew that Dick was carrying some sort of an accident policy. When we were in Portland together, last August, my Uncle Phineas and I went with Dick to put in his claim for payment because of his injured wrist."

"How did all three of you happen to go? Did he think he'd need to be backed up?"

"Not at all. We had been lunching together. After luncheon, Dick said he was going to stop at the com-

pany's office. We stopped with him." Chris then went on to say that they had been treated to various insults, had been asked to produce witnesses to the accident, among other extraordinary demands, and had finally been curtly dismissed with instructions to call again. Chris said that he and Uncle Phineas were both angry. But that Father had merely said it served him right for attempting to deal with crooks, and that he would never go to their office again, nor pay another premium. In so far as he was concerned, Chris said, he had not given the matter of the policy another thought. He had not known that it had carried any such indemnity in case of accidental death. He had known nothing more concerning it.

"Did you," Thopson questioned, "happen to mention this matter to your wife?"

"You have heard my wife's testimony. I did not."

"Not in the habit of confiding in your wife, eh?"

Chris kept his temper like a gentleman. It was more than I could have done, but I was proud of him for doing it. "I am not in the habit of burdening my wife with exhaustively trivial details which could neither amuse nor interest her."

"Did your uncle, Phineas Quilter, feel the same way about confiding in his wife?"

"I should assume that he did. However, I am unable to answer for the feelings of my uncle."

"You don't know, then, whether the lady who is at home sick in bed was aware of the ten-thousand-dollar indemnity?"

"I think not. My aunt is not a secretive person. Had

she known, I fancy she would have told some one of us, at least. Also, my Uncle Phineas had not known of the policy prior to the day when we called at the office of the company with my Cousin Dick. Since that time, my Uncle Phineas has not returned to Q 2 Ranch."

"Your uncle, I suppose, never writes any letters to his wife?"

"He writes to her, certainly."

"And if he had written to her about the policy, you think she would not agree with you that the ten-thousand-dollar indemnity was too trivial to mention?"

"I have told you, under oath, that I had not known of that indemnity."

"It makes quite a difference as to the policy's importance, doesn't it?"

"It does."

"By the way, Mr. Quilter, have you tried, recently, to put another mortgage on Q 2 Ranch?"

"I have."

"Were you attending to that when you were in Portland, last August?"

"I was."

"Did you succeed in raising the money you wanted?"

"I did not."

"Mr. Quilter, how long have you and your wife been residing on Q 2 Ranch?"

"We came there last March."

Thopson counted on his stubby fingers. "Seven months. You were not at the Q 2 Ranch at any time last year, were you?"

"We were not."

“Finished with the witness.”

I hoped that Mr. Ward would take Chris, then. He did not. He sat still.

They called Aunt Gracia to the stand.

CHAPTER XV

I

I HAD been as nervous as an old woman about Aunt Gracia all during these everlasting proceedings. She and I had ridden to Quilterville together to keep from crowding the carriage.

We were no sooner mounted, and off, than she began to talk to me about hoping I'd be "discreet" at the inquest. I did not understand her, at first. We had held sort of a family council before we had left home and Grandfather had talked to us. Over and over—you know how unusual it is for Grandfather to be reiterative—he had impressed upon us the necessity for telling the absolute truth.

He explained, of course, that he did not suppose any of us would lie, but that affairs of this sort were apt to invite attempted diplomacy, finesse. None of us, Grandfather went on to say, had any reason to fear the truth. Truth, he asked us to remember, was the one thing that could not ultimately be defeated. He gave us rather a sermon, insisting that truth bred truth as surely as cabbages bred cabbages, or as lies bred lies. Grandfather, as you know, would neither dictate nor appeal; but he came closer to each, in this talk to us, than I had ever heard him come.

I was still thinking of his last statement (Lucy would call it a pearl), "One cannot bargain with truth," when Aunt Gracia began her talk about discretion. It seemed to me that she was unsaying most of the things Grandfather had said; but it was easier to doubt my own understanding than it was to doubt either Aunt Gracia's dutifulness or her rigid integrity. It wasn't long, though, until she gave me no opportunity for choice; so then I asked her, straight, if she was disagreeing with what Grandfather had said to us in the parlour.

She answered that Grandfather was old, very old, and at present frightfully weakened from shock, grief, and the impending horror of disgrace. She said that, fundamentally, what Grandfather had been telling us about truth was sound; but, in many circumstances, truth should become a delicate thing, to be handled delicately, not swung as a bludgeon. She said that truth might breed truth, if it were planted in the proper soil. If it were tossed carelessly to the four winds it might breed nothing—as cabbage seeds sown in the sagebrush would breed nothing—or it might breed anything: destruction, disgrace. Grandfather's idealism, she remarked, like many other beautiful things, was not always the most practical asset in a time of emergency.

You will understand, Judy, that I actually had to turn in my saddle and look to make sure that it was Aunt Gracia, of the nonadjustable moralities, who was riding beside me.

She misread my look, because she said: "Exactly, Neal. We are to use the truth to-day, but we are to use it carefully, with discretion. For instance, dear, the

fact that I can find comfort in the knowledge that Dick died in a state of perfect grace, need not be brought out. Unless we are directly questioned, I should think the entire circumstance of Dick's recent baptism might better be omitted from the testimony. Too, I can see no reason for telling anyone who may be there to-day about the fact that Dick and Christopher had recently exchanged rooms."

"Aunt Gracia," I asked, "do you think that some one of us meant to kill Chris, and blundered into Father's room, by mistake?"

She evaded that by saying it was more important, now, to plan for the future than it was to probe into the past.

I told her that I agreed with her. But, I fancy, we did not mean the same thing. It was a peach of a morning, Judy. The snow had melted. The air was sweet. Hiroshige had done the sky, and our brown old hills lay softly in front of it. It was not the realization of death, it was the realization of life—of a world alive; even our hills were only napping—that made me go suddenly rabid.

Aunt Gracia interrupted my ravings. "Don't, Neal. Don't," she commanded. "You sound like Jasper in *Edwin Drood*."

That was plain enough, wasn't it? "Aunt Gracia," I said, "it is bothering you, isn't it, to decide whether I shot Father because I thought that he was going insane, or whether I meant to go into Chris's room that night, and shot Father by mistake?"

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Because you say we must mention neither the bap-

tism nor the changed rooms at the inquest to-day. Because I know that you have suspected me, from the first. Would it help you any to have me swear to you, out here in the open, that I am as innocent as you are?"

"Yes," she said.

"I swear it, Aunt Gracia."

We rode along and had made the ford before she said another word. She came up beside me on the east river path.

"Neal," she said, "this is an irreligious community. Consequently, there are two words they like to roll around their tongues—'Religious fanatic.' I am hoping they won't think of those two words to-day."

She grew intense. She does, you know, once in a blue moon. She said that she wasn't a coward. She said she would be glad to say that she had killed Father, and then go to join him, and Mother, and the others in one of the highest states of glory. But, she said, such a false confession could do nothing but bring added shame and grief to the family. If only, she said, she were not a Quilter—then how eagerly she would sacrifice her own life and honour for the honour of the Quilters.

I felt, of course, like asking her not to be an idiot. I didn't. I produced some banality about the uselessness of such a sacrifice—allowing the real criminal to go free, all that.

"I know," she answered, "but—the ecstasy of it! The exquisite, vivid ecstasy of such a sacrifice. Or—of any sacrifice. Isn't it odd, Neal, that no one ever pities Isaac?"

You can understand, Judy, that that just about

knocked me a twister. You can understand, too, why I had been dreading Aunt Gracia's turn as a witness. I tell you what, Jude, every one of the family has got the rotten habit of thinking that, because Aunt Gracia's mind is different from our own, it is inferior—deformed. We have no right to the comparison. It is as unfair as comparing—well, say ice and water. I'd be bound to muddle a metaphor here—but Aunt Gracia's mind is surely more fluid in its mysticism than are ours in their set materialism. This is all pretty poor. I wish you might have been there, to-day, to see and hear Aunt Gracia.

II

When I saw her gather up the skirt of her long black riding habit and walk across that dirty room and take her place in the witness chair, the thought flashed through my mind that it was a wonder that Olympe, ill or not, would have forgone such an opportunity. Only, and I'm not meaning to knock Olympe, either, Aunt Gracia's dignity and distinction were natural, untrimmed: the difference between one of our Percherons in a meadow or decked out in a circus parade.

Hank put her through the usual preliminaries, and then asked her, as he had asked us, to tell the jury what she knew about the murder.

Sitting there, dressed in black in that gloomy room, with her face a white oval and her long hands, white and still in her lap, she needed a Rembrandt. She is old, past thirty, but she is beautiful; especially beautiful with her head tipped as she had it this afternoon, so

that her thin features are a bit foreshortened. And as for her voice—they can extol soft, velvety, throaty voices for women. But I'll take Aunt Gracia's voice every time—it is like a clear glass bell being rung with decorum.

"My story," she said, "would be precisely the same as the stories the others have told you. My fright, my efforts to open my door, my release, could further in no way the purposes of this inquiry. You have listened, patiently, to three accounts of the sort; but you are, I believe, no nearer the truth than you were in the beginning. It seems wise to me, now, to bring several matters to your attention.

"You have not taken into account the fact that whoever was in my brother's room on Monday night must have been there for sometime before the shot was fired. The rope was not put in place after the shot was fired. From the position of the rope in the snow, and from the amount of snow that had fallen on it, we were able to tell that the rope must have been lying, for at least an hour, exactly where we found it.

"My brother was a light sleeper. Does it seem reasonable, even possible, that anyone could come into his room, open a window, tie a rope around his bedstead, toss the rope out of the window, while he slept? Or, while he lay there in bed and calmly watched the person making these preparations? If, for some reason, my brother had been unable to move—though he was not unable to move—don't you know that he would have called, cried out for help? You have listened to the testimony that members of the family could be plainly

heard shouting to one another through the closed locked doors. Would my brother, would any man, lie in silence, motionless, and allow some intruder to remain in his room?

"No; not unless he were forced to do so. What could have forced him? The gun that killed him—nothing else. But not the gun alone. The gun in the hands of some strong, powerful person of whom my brother would have been afraid.

"I wonder how many people in this county would testify that Richard Quilter was a brave man? Every person, I think, who knew him. I wonder how many people would have dared to sneak into my brother's room and menace him with a gun. Very few, I believe.

"It has been suggested, or, perhaps, I should say insinuated, that my cousin, Irene Quilter, shot my brother. Look at her. Do you think she would have dared? Assume that she did dare. Do you think that she could have frightened my brother—a man six feet tall and afraid of nothing? How long do you think it would have taken him to leap from his bed and seize any weapon held in her trembling hands? She is a frail woman, bred in an Eastern city. Probably she has never discharged a gun in her life. She, as you must know, could not menace a coward for five minutes. Could she have menaced Richard Quilter for an hour—two hours?

"It took a man who was expert with a gun to be able to keep my brother covered while he stooped to tie that rope around the foot of the bed. True, he had it in readiness, or so it would surely seem. He had one loop made, shall we say? But, gentlemen, to draw fifty feet

of rope through a loop is not the work of an instant. The murderer had to stoop to fasten the rope. He had to do it with his left hand, while his right hand held the gun that cowed my brother.

"Dr. Elm has told me, and will testify under oath, that my brother was not drugged at the time of his death; that he had been given no drug of any sort before his death. Can you see Dick Quilter, as you knew him, alert, active, fearless, lying there in bed while some weak, inadequate person crouched to place that rope? I think you cannot.

"Three women were in the house that night: an old lady, past sixty—my aunt, Olympe Quilter—Irene Quilter, and I. Also, there was my little niece, Richard's daughter, a twelve-year-old child. Do you think that Richard would have allowed any one of us to threaten him with a gun for a longer time than it took him to reach us and take the thing away from us?

"My father was in the house that night. You know him. But, aside from that, you have seen him on the witness stand to-day. He is eighty years old. Would Richard have been afraid to unarm him, do you fancy? Would Richard have been afraid to unarm this eighteen-year-old son of his? Or, could Richard have been afraid of our cousin, Christopher Quilter?

"I dislike saying this, here, but I will say it because I must. My brother loved our Cousin Christopher; but he scorned him. He thought, perhaps rightly, that Christopher was a weakling. Though Richard had been ill for some time, he could work all day at tasks that tired Christopher in a few hours. What opportunity in an

Eastern university, in his studies abroad, had Christopher had to develop prowess with a gun? He was never a sportsman. As a boy he never went hunting. I doubt that he has fired a gun half a dozen times in his life. All of which would mean nothing, perhaps, but for the fact that Richard knew it as well as I know it. Do you think that Christopher, a man of much frailer physique than my brother, could have frightened him for five minutes; could have kept him cowed and silent for an hour? Do you think that Dick Quilter, with any one of these seven people, would not have made an attempt to save himself?"

Thopson interrupted and wanted to know if Aunt Gracia was not overlooking the fact that, perhaps, Richard Quilter was in the act of making that attempt when he was shot.

"I will remind you," Aunt Gracia said, "that the rope had been in the position we found it for at least an hour. Nothing but knowledge that such an attempt would mean certain death could have held my brother passive for an hour. As you suggest, it is possible that at last, in desperation, he did make an attempt to save himself. You know the result.

"There is another point that has not been touched upon: the lighted lamp in Richard's room that night. I had put the small bedside lamp, newly filled, as usual, in his room that evening. At midnight, the lamp was burning low; the oil was all but exhausted. Since, I have refilled the lamp and tested it for time. It took two hours and a half to consume as much oil as had been consumed on Monday night. It had never been my brother's

practice to read in bed. There was no book or magazine near his bed. Why should the lamp have burned throughout the night?

"Assume that when Richard went into his room that night, the murderer was hiding there—probably in the clothes closet—and, after Richard had got into bed, but before he had reached to extinguish the light, the man had stepped out, with the gun levelled on him——"

"Wouldn't you say, Miss Quilter, that two hours and a half was a long time for the murderer to have spent in your brother's room?"

"I should, indeed."

"A long time, too, for such a man as your brother to have allowed himself to be 'menaced' without making an attempt to disarm the fellow, without raising his voice in outcry?"

"It seems to me that is precisely what I have been contending, Mr. Thopson. I presume, however, that you have thought ahead to the second point which I was about to make. This:

"We have no way of knowing what went on in Dick's room that night. None of us, I am sure, knows all there is to be known about any other person. We think that there was no hidden chapter, no hidden page or paragraph in my brother's life. We cannot know it. Suppose some ruffian was making a blackmailing demand from Richard. Suppose that Richard was as eager as was the man himself to keep the rest of us from knowing that he—the murderer, I mean—was in the house; had any reason for being there.

"We know nothing of these possibilities now. I hope we may know, in time. What we do know now is that no member of this family could have caused Richard one moment's alarm. That he could have and would have disarmed any one of us in the snatch of a second, and sent us ashamed away from him.

"My brother's corpse is lying in the adjoining room. I ask the jury to look at it. To see the size of the man, the breadth of his shoulders. I ask them to see what can be seen in his dead face—the strength, the purpose, the courage. I ask them to return and look at us, here. Then they will know, since they are just, wise men, that I have spoken the truth."

Impressive? Golly, Jude, it was a knockout. On the square, it is thanks to Aunt Gracia—the family disgrace because she happens to be a mystic—that Irene, or Chris, or, probably, both of them aren't going to have to appear before the Grand Jury. And, if you will forgive the old wise crack, it wasn't so much what she said as the way she said it. Sitting there, so aloof and so lovely, speaking in that clear, unafraid voice of hers, she conveyed the impression that no man's doubt could damage her; that any man's doubt would prove him a fool or a monster. One doesn't, you know, look at the white moon in a black night's sky and remark, "I don't believe it." And yet, after all, the moon is not a large and luminous dinner plate.

Note, Judy: Aunt Gracia had made a special point, to me in private, of the fact that Father was taking medicine that made him sleep heavily. Dr. Joe knew it. Would he have called a sleeping medicine "drugs"?

Possibly, almost certainly, not if he had had a talk with Aunt Gracia before the inquest. Because, you see, if Father had been drugged into a heavy sleep, all Aunt Gracia's arguments would amount to nothing. The person could have crept into the room, made the arrangements with the rope without waking Father; could have fired the shot, and could have got away. Smash goes the fact of Father's lack of fear; smash goes the fact of his disarming any one of us; smash goes the expert gunman—smash for all of it. Not much bravery is required to shoot a sleeping man.

It doesn't seem reasonable to suppose that, even if Father had been drugged and asleep, some guy would have had the nerve to stick around in the room for a couple of hours with the lamp burning. But it is possible, anyway, that Father got into bed and was so dopey, and tired that he dropped off to sleep and forgot to blow out the light.

Here is another thing, Judy. If the guy had been hiding in Father's room before Father came into it, couldn't he have fixed the rope then? Sure he could. Father didn't look under his bed at night, did he? He would have noticed if the window had been open and the rope stretched across to it as we found it. But he wouldn't have noticed a loop of rope around the leg of his bed. The fellow did not, necessarily, have to pull the fifty feet of rope through the loop with one hand while he used the other hand to keep Father covered with a gun.

Since I didn't think through to any of this until I was riding home from Quilterville this evening, I am fairly certain that the jury hasn't come to it yet. For one

thing, as I have said, Aunt Gracia obviated doubt by making it seem idiotic and indecent. For another thing, the jury, at the last, was straining every nerve to live up to her description and look like wise and just men.

When Aunt Gracia had finished her speech, which I've copied straight from Mattie's notes for you, she began to gather her skirts into one hand, preparatory to leaving the witness chair.

Chris whispered to me, "Bless her, she's turned the tide!"

Thopson said, "One moment, please, Miss Quilter."

Aunt Gracia sat back in her chair, and dropped her hands, quiet as dead things, into her lap again.

III

Thopson started off with a lot of con talk about how helpful she had been, and about how she had his gratitude and the gratitude of the jury for her plain speaking. It was only through such methods as hers, extolled he, that the guilty wretch could ever be brought to justice. It sounded great. But I felt, like the carpenter, that the butter was spread too thick. Aunt Gracia sat, pale and placid, and looking about as susceptible to flattery as my but recently mentioned moon.

"You have implied," Thopson finally came to it, "that your brother might have had an enemy. By a rigorous searching of your memory, would it be possible for you to recall who this enemy might be?"

"But, of course," Aunt Gracia answered, "I thought

that you knew. Seventeen, nearly eighteen years ago, my brother killed a man as he would have killed a mad dog, or a rattlesnake, or any dangerous thing that was attacking his wife. He was tried, and acquitted. The jury did not leave the room. The judge apologized to Richard—or so I have been told—explaining that the trial had been merely a conformance to the letter of the law.”

“Do you know the name of the man whom Richard Quilter killed?”

“Enos Karabass. The Pennsylvania Dutch, I believe, are unfortunate people to anger.”

“His family lives in this vicinity?”

“No, they do not.”

“Were they informed concerning the manner of his death?”

“We were unable to find that he had any people.”

Thopson gave himself over to pity. “But, my dear Miss Quilter——”

“You asked me if it could be possible that my brother had an enemy. Any man who has ever killed another man might, it seems to me, have dangerous enemies from that time forth.”

“I see. I see. Granted, then, for the sake of argument that that man had a brother, or a son, who wanted to avenge his death. Would it have been possible for him to enter your home without detection?”

“Quite possible. Our outside doors are never locked until the last thing at night. While we were at supper, in the dining room, anyone could have walked in, quietly, and gone upstairs.”

"You have no watchdogs on your place?"

"We have two dogs. I mentioned suppertime because, usually at that hour, the dogs are at the back of the house waiting for, or eating, their suppers."

"Very well. He could have gotten into the house. He could have hidden in your brother's bedroom. But—— Could he have gotten out of the house? That is, could he have gotten out of the house without leaving any footprints in the snow? This does seem to bring us back to the beginning, doesn't it?"

Aunt Gracia said, "He could have got out of the house, because he did get out. How he escaped we have not, as yet, been able to discover. That is the problem to be solved. We have one fact. He is not in our home at present. That leads to another fact, unexplained, but not conjectural. He has escaped. It is stupid, and so it is an insult to the intelligence of this jury for us to keep insisting that the man could not have got out of the house, when we all know that he *has* got out of the house."

The jury shone from the sensation of having their intelligences mentioned.

"Very well," Thopson assumed acceptance, "we'll rest that for the present. Now, if you please, I'd like to take up, with you, the matter of the locked doors."

Aunt Gracia invited, "Yes. I wish you would."

I am asking you, Judy, is she a clever woman, or isn't she?

"All of the outside doors were locked, on the inside, I presume, on the night of October eighth?"

"No. We have three outside doors. The side door was

locked, on the inside. Both the front and back doors were unlocked. Anyone could have come downstairs and have walked straight out of the house through either of those doors."

"Without leaving footprints in the snow?"

"I am sorry," Aunt Gracia said, "I thought that we were speaking now only of the doors."

"Whose duty was it to lock those outside doors at night?"

"It was no one's duty. Usually, the last person downstairs, in the evening, attended to locking the house."

"Who was the last person downstairs that night?"

"My brother. That is, he was the last person to retire. It should have been his care to lock the doors."

"Would it have been possible for him to have forgotten to lock them?"

"Very possible. Locked doors are given, or were given, very little attention on our ranch. I fancy that we slept many nights with the doors unlocked."

It seemed to me that, if I had been in Thopson's place, I should have asked, then, how it happened, in a house where locked doors were given no attention, that there were keys for all the upstairs doors. (Aunt Gracia's statement was truthful enough. She had said, "were given." A month or so ago, not one of our bedroom doors had a key to it. Aunt Gracia had had to hunt them all out from the hardware box in the attic.) Thopson missed it, however, and went on to ask her to tell him exactly which doors were locked that night.

"Except for the seven bedroom doors, which were

locked on the outside," she said, "and for the side door, downstairs, I think every door in the house was unlocked, including the inside and outside cellar doors. To be sure, I had almost forgotten, the door to the back stairway was locked. Irene Quilter has told you how that came to be locked."

"Into what downstairs room," Thopson inquired, "does the back stairway lead?"

"Into the sitting room."

"Not the room in which Mrs. Christopher Quilter was sleeping that night?"

"Yes."

"Why, then, did Mrs. Christopher Quilter not unlock that door, and go up the back stairway, instead of going through the several downstairs rooms, in order to use the front stairway?"

"That question is easily answered, Mr. Thopson. The back stairway is crooked and narrow. We none of us ever use it. In her terrorized state, my cousin would surely act according to habit. Her habit was to use the front stairway."

Can you sort the truth out of that, Judy? Irene, who never did any work, and who was never in a hurry, generally did use the front stairway. The rest of us used the back stairway as often as we used the front one. Do you know why Aunt Gracia deliberately lied about it? I don't know, entirely. And I don't know why Irene did not run right up the back stairway that night. I wish that I did know. Though, surely, Aunt Gracia might have been right about Irene's acting according to habit. It was her habit to go upstairs the front way, and she

was badly frightened. I guess we'll have to let it go at that.

Thopson's next question was a stunner. "Could you swear, Miss Quilter, that no member of your family could have gone into Richard Quilter's room, committed the murder, slipped out through the hall and back into his own room? I understand that the turmoil in the hall would have covered any slight noise that night."

For the first time, Aunt Gracia hedged. "I think that I understand your question, Mr. Thopson; but may I ask you to state it a bit more directly, so that I may give a direct answer?"

"Would you swear that there was not time for any member of your family to have gone into your brother's room, committed the murder, and got back into his own room, before Irene Quilter came into the upper hall?"

"No. I could not swear to that, because there was time. I could and do swear, however, that no member of our family did do what you have suggested because, though there was time, there was not opportunity. I make this oath for two reasons. The one reason, I have given you: No member of our family could have kept Dick Quilter cowed for five minutes—much less for an hour or longer. The second reason I have not, as yet, given to you. It is this: Each member of the Quilter family was locked in his or her room that night at the time of the murder. All seven bedroom doors were locked on the outside. One of the bedrooms was unoccupied—but that door was also locked. Irene Quilter found seven keys in my brother's room, and used one

key to unlock each door. No, Mr. Thopson, we have more than Irene's word for that. The keys were left on the outside of the locks. Only a few minutes later my father and I turned all those keys again. We did this, hoping that the murderer might be hiding in one of these rooms, and that we could keep him locked there while we searched the remainder of the house."

"Granted," Thopson said, "that six of you were locked in your rooms on that night. There still remains a seventh, Miss Quilter, who was not locked in her room."

Aunt Gracia said: "Mr. Thopson, please be fair about this. Can you imagine anyone who would plan a murder by carefully establishing alibis for every person in the house except herself? Do you suppose that if Irene Quilter had planned to kill my brother, she would have arranged to be the one person in the house who was not locked in a room at the time?"

"Am I unfair when I suggest that plans sometimes miscarry?"

"No, you are not. That is a fair thing to say. But no person ever plans a murder so that the burden of suspicion, even stupid suspicion, falls upon himself. It would seem, too, Mr. Thopson, that in this instance the murderer's carefully laid plans had not miscarried. My brother is dead. The murderer has escaped—got clear and away, and, as yet, no one of us has one clue as to his identity."

She put it over, Judy. All honour to Aunt Gracia! Mr. Ward knew better than to say a word when Thopson signified that he was ready to excuse her. It was she,

the family misfortune, who got the verdict for us—the verdict that allowed us all to go free.

Thopson called Dr. Joe again. Dr. Joe testified, under oath, that Father had been given no drug of any sort that night. Do you suppose that Dr. Joe could salve his conscience, if he needed to, with the difference between “had been given no drug” and “had taken no drug”?

As Dr. Joe came back to sit with us, Gus Wildoch and the two guys who had been at the ranch with him came sneaking in at the back of the room. They had been subpoenaed for witnesses, and had been called right after Dr. Joe—as I should have mentioned. But Hank had explained that they had sent in word that they might be a little late, owing to a rush of duties, and he had proceeded to go along without them. I fancy that Hank was trying to keep them out of it. Or, perhaps Gus himself, with his regard for the elder Quilters, was trying to evade testifying. Their evidence, however, was certainly not damaging.

Since each of them said the same thing, in almost the same way, I’ll lump their testimony to save your time and my space.

They had come with Christopher Quilter, at his request, to Q 2 Ranch on the morning of Tuesday, October the ninth. They had seen and had carefully examined the body of Richard Quilter. He had been shot through the left chest. Rigor mortis had been complete when they had arrived. They had inspected the Quilter mansion and grounds. They couldn’t say as to footprints—the place was pretty well tracked up by the time they got there. Gus didn’t “go much on these here footprints,

anyhow—too many ways to get around them, such as wearing the other fellow's shoes." They had been unable to form any opinions as to who the murderer might be.

Thopson tried none of his baiting with them. The two deputies, I was later informed, were Gus's two brothers who have come recently from Texas, and the three made rather a formidable trio: combined heights about nineteen feet; combined weights close to six hundred pounds.

They were excused, and Hank grew confidential with the jury. He told them that if they wanted to go into the other room and talk things over for a few minutes, they could—he guessed. But he reminded them that they and he should get home and get their milking and other chores put through. He guessed that they saw, as he saw, that a lot of time had been wasted, and that, "furthermore," there wasn't sense nor reason in fiddle-faddling much longer. Some dirty son of a sea cook had broken into the Quilter mansion and shot Dick Quilter and made a getaway. Hank finished by expressing his deep regret that the law wasn't able to help the Quilters out in any way, right now; and, adding his fervent hope that soon it might be able to lay hands on the Dutchman, or whatever dirty crook had done it, he turned the case over to the jury.

If I had been writing a book, I'd have kept their verdict a dark secret until now. But since I have sacrificed my literary style to your peace of mind, I have had to miss my climax.

However, perhaps this will serve: What Aunt Gracia told the jury, with my comments appended.

1. Father was the strongest member of the family.

True a year ago. Not true a week ago.

2. Father could have disarmed any member of the family.

Doubtful, certainly, a week ago. But, say that he could have disarmed any one of us. Would he have tried to? Can you see Father jumping at any one of us, and snatching a gun from us? I can't. Judy, you and I know that he would have lain there in bed and tried to shame us out of our nonsense. Aunt Gracia was right about that. He couldn't have feared a one of us. He would have thought that we were staging a bluff. Would he have called it? Yes, and for any length of time. I can imagine him lying there in bed and laughing at us.

3. Father had not been drugged. He was in full possession of all his faculties.

Is this the truth? Did Dr. Joe lie helpfully?

4. None of us ever used the back stairway.

We all used it, except possibly Irene.

5. Since the murderer was not in our house, he must have escaped from it.

You don't need me to point the sophistry of that.

6. We were all locked in our rooms. Proof: Irene found seven keys, unlocked seven doors, and left seven keys on the outside of the doors.

There are ten doors in our upper hall. Irene found and used seven keys. You can think that out. I'm not going to write it. Remember that all the keys to the locks in the upper hall are interchangeable. The attic door had had no key. It has now. I have brought it

down from the hardware box in the attic. My one bit of sleuthing. But whether that was its first or second trip downstairs within the week, it did not say.

IV

Judy, I'm not crazy—though sometimes I feel, almost, as if I were. I am not trying to prove, with this quibbling, that some member of the Quilter family shot and killed Father. It seems to me that the single hope I have left, for anything, is to prove that no member of the family is a murderer. But I am bound to be with Grandfather concerning truth. I have to get my proof through truth—nothing else can satisfy me. I have to establish Quilter innocence, and reestablish Quilter honour, before I can begin to try to establish anything else.

Aunt Gracia proved Quilter innocence to the six good men and true. I'd give a thousand of the best grazing acres on Q 2 to have had her prove it to me. I'd give more than that. My own life, of course—but it is not worth shucks. I'd give Lucy's life, or Grandfather's, just as they would give them, for that certainty.

Do you know, I have found one way I can almost get it. My way hasn't anything to do with ropes, or keys, or coal oil. It hasn't anything to do with footprints, or motives, or drugs.

I do this. I take us, one at a time. I begin with Grandfather, and I come straight through the list to Lucy. I stop at each name. I think. I put into that thinking every particle of knowledge I have concerning each

person, and I keep out of it every particle of prejudice and every atom of affection or of admiration. I judge them as objectively as I judge cattle for buying or breeding. Each time I do it, I come out with a clean slate. That method, and nothing else, gives me my certainty, my sure knowledge that not one of the Quilter family could be guilty of crime.

And that, after consideration, I am bound to state is a lie. It gives me my certainty—with one exception. That is why I don't go after it more often. That is why I am afraid of my certainty. Each time, more positively than the last, it omits one person. Probably you don't need to have me tell you who the one person is. Neal Quilter.

Neal Quilter could have done it. Suppose that he had. Suppose that he had planned the thing keenly, as it was planned, from beginning to end. And then, as Aunt Gracia said, since we are dealing with suppositions, suppose that the horror of having done such a thing should have driven him clear out of his mind; should have caused a real brain storm—so that, when the storm had cleared, he had forgotten every incident connected with the crime.

I wish I knew more about minds. I wish I knew whether a thing of the sort ever had happened or ever could happen. Chris says that great strides in psychology are to be made within the next decade. I tried to pump him about it, since he is interested in the subject. But of course, since I was unwilling to say to him what I have said to you, I got no real satisfaction. Still, since it is recognizedly possible that a man may forget his

entire past, including his own name, and continue to go about as a fairly normal person, I don't see why it should be impossible for him to forget, entirely, some one particular horror.

Granting the amnesia, I could have done it. I could have gone upstairs some time in the late afternoon and fixed that rope on the bed, and collected the keys from the inside of the doors. (Where I got a gun, and what I did with it afterwards, are, of course, other things I would have forgotten. I can reconstruct with the material now at hand. I cannot remember.) Then, on Monday night, before Father put out his light, I could have stepped across the hall to his room. If I had gone in there, threatening him with a gun, do you think he'd have jumped out of bed and taken the gun away from me? I think not. Aunt Gracia was right about that. Father would not have been afraid of any one of us. Why, even I would laugh if any member of our family came dodging into my room flourishing a gun. Or, perhaps I should say, even I, a week ago, would have laughed.

But we'll say I didn't show my gun. We'll say that I kept it in my back pocket for an hour or so while we talked, Father and I. If I had decided to kill him rather than allow him to go insane, I might have desired a long, confirmatory talk. Unless the rope is clear outside the whole affair of the murder—as Chris still insists—we can no longer suppose that I had meant to shoot Chris, and shot Father by mistake. That hour, with the rope out across the porch roof, has to be accounted for.

I might have fixed the rope at eleven o'clock, deciding

that I would use it in the next five minutes. And, after that, something might have caused me to delay for another hour. The rope hocus-pocus certainly would not have caused Father to take either me or my threats any more seriously. Can't you imagine the conversation?

"What are you planning to do with the clothes-line, my son?"

"I am going to use it to escape out of the window after I have shot you."

We know that Father would have laughed at me; unless, of course, he had decided that I had gone mad. In that case, he might have started to get out of bed to take the gun away from me.

Well, then, I had the rope fixed, we'll say. I shot Father. I went to the window and discovered the snow. I knew that the rope could not be used, then, because the footprints on the roof would betray me. What might I have done? It is absurdly simple. I might have stepped across the hall to my own room and locked myself in—*with the key to the attic door*. Yes, as I have said, I have since found the key in the hardware box in the attic. But if Grandfather, or Aunt Gracia, had discovered an extra key in my room, when they were searching the house, would they have declaimed concerning it, or would they have hidden it away in the box?

Why I should have had the key, if I had planned the rope escape, I can't think. Why I should have planned the rope, I can't think. I might have had some wily scheme, involving both the key and the rope. Or the

entire idea of the rope might have been one of the fool mistakes that murderers, according to the best traditions, always make. Leaving the door between my room and Lucy's unlocked would seem, certainly, to have been another mistake.

The question of time is a nice one. I needed, after the shot was fired, to have looked out of the window, crossed the full width of Father's room, got across the hall and into my own room, locked the door, picked up a chair, and battered the door with it. Lucy needed to have got out of bed, put on her slippers, lighted her lamp, run across her room to my door, opened it. It might work out. I don't know. I think that I couldn't have done my part of it in two minutes. Then I remember how long two minutes were when you were taking Greg's temperature.

On the whole, the time seems to be against me. What I could have done with the gun seems to be for me. When I remember how this house was searched, it seems impossible that I could have hidden a gun anywhere in it. It certainly would have been found. I could not have thrown it out of a window. We'd have seen it in the snow. Though, after all, I have a good baseball arm; I might have thrown it out of Father's open window. No, that's nonsense. It would have been found, long before this. However, the fact that the gun is gone doesn't weigh very heavily against the facts that no one got out of the house that night and that no one was hiding in the house that night.

I suppose you might suggest that Chris was as capable of the crime as I was. It won't do. Chris loved Father:

not enough to kill him rather than have him lose that splendid mind of his, but too much to kill him for any other reason. Father had stopped opposing the sale of the ranch. Chris had Father's ill health and overwork on this place to use as an excuse for selling us out. He had Father's ability as a rancher to salve his conscience if he stuck us on some dinky valley truck farm. Also, Chris is a rank sentimentalist and—may I say consequently—something of a coward.

Yet, when I go to calling Chris names, I suspect that I should go softly. I have wondered, these last few days, whether instead of fighting what I have always decried as Quilter sentimentality, I have been fighting, merely, a subtle sensitiveness, an ability for loving, which I have been too boorish to possess or to understand. The thought of marrying some queen and giving her a right to paw over me and call me "Boofel," nauseates me. Look at Uncle Phineas tethered to Olympe. Look at Chris deeded to Irene! You and Greg are different; but you are friends. You bake your bread, instead of feasting on the yeast. And—you are a Quilter woman. But what I started to say was, that I have wondered whether this lack of sentimentality in me denoted simply a hard streak, a streak of yellow, perhaps a streak of cruelty.

I've wondered, too, if the fact that Father killed that cur a few months before I was born, and that Mother saw him do it, might have made me different. People seem to think that prenatal influences are important. I have never believed it, because it seems to me if that were true of people it would be true of animals. Still,

what do I know about it? Or about anything? There is this: I don't feel as if I were incapable of love, if love is the rather tremendously serious, and yet, someway, the very humorous, clutching feeling I have for the family and for Q 2. But I do feel as if talking about it, showing it off as Irene and Chris show it off, defiled it.

There is Aunt Gracia, to-day, and the feeling I have about her. She sat there, lying under oath, to save the Quilter family; to save, I know, either Irene and Chris or Irene and me. There isn't one of us, I suppose, who would not have been willing to sacrifice his own honour, peace of mind, and the rest, to such a cause. But, by Jove, I think Aunt Gracia is the only one of us who is brave enough to sacrifice eternity. I know exactly what she did to-day. Should I go to her and spiel a lot of mushy stuff about loving her for it? Should I cheapen her magnificence to gratify my own emotionalism? Should I write my name in red pencil on the base of a marble column?

In other words—what a good boy am I! Sitting here, teetering with tragedy, and revelling in congratulatory self-analysis. Ask me this, Judy. Ask me why I have not mentioned again the important fact that was brought out during to-day's inquisition? That is, why I have so carefully avoided further discussion of the fact that Father's death may bring to his family a payment of ten thousand needed dollars? Should you believe me if I told you that, for the last several hours, I had forgotten it? I hope you are too sensible to believe that. Ask me why, just now, when I was making out the case against myself, I did not mention a ten-thousand-

dollar motive? Ten thousand dollars would mean enough money for Irene and Chris to go where they please, with enough left over to carry Q 2 through to safety. I remarked, during the inquest, that I had not known about the accident policy. I seemed to be believed. I seem to have believed myself——

v

Later.

Sorry, Judy dear. I am a fool. Even this forgetting business would, I suppose, need to stop somewhere. I had not known about the policy. And talking is rot. My apology, if you'll have it, is that Father's death has been a knockout. I've been feeling too much—unaccustomed feelings. I have been thinking, or trying to think, until my brain has worn out from effort.

I am all right again now. I've been out with Uncle Phineas walking and waiting for the sunrise. He is all cut up, torn up about Father. And yet, somehow, the fact that he was not here on Monday night, and that he didn't have the horror of that first hour, seems to make him more wholesome, saner than any of us.

He was here at home when we got back from the inquest last evening. He came running down the path to meet us, with tears washing out of his eyes and all over his cheeks, but he was paying no more attention to them than he would have paid to rain. He is one of us—a Quilter straight through—and neck deep in trouble with us. But it is as if he had come in, on purpose, while the rest of us have been chucked in.

Olympe was out of bed, when we came from Quilterville yesterday, as chipper as you please in Aunt Gracia's best kitchen dress with a little doily of an apron. She actually had helped Lucy prepare supper for the three of them. Olympe would be correctly costumed for the frying of ham and eggs.

(Dr. Joe has envoys scouring Chinatown for Dong Lee, but he is not to be discovered. He was to have stayed a week; so we know that he'll be back on Monday; but we could do with him sooner. It is tough for Aunt Gracia, this having him gone just now.)

While the rest of us were getting a pick-up supper in the kitchen, Olympe disappeared. Sure enough, in a few minutes, here she came, wearing that black lace rig of hers, with the red roses and red velvet loops ripped off of it. A pity, since, by that time, Lucy and I were the only ones who had stayed downstairs.

Olympe stopped in the kitchen doorway and asked us where Pan was. We told her that he had gone to Grandfather's room with him. She trailed forward to the table, delivered the first part of her "God help the Quilter wives'" speech, and turned to sweep from the room. Lucy laughed.

You see, in her haste to get into mourning, Olympe had forgotten the back of her gown. Do you remember its long, square train, caught up in two places with great blobs of a horrible shade of red velvet and red roses? She had forgotten to remove them.

It was not amusing. Lucy laughed, as you know, not in spite of our trouble, but because of it. If Lucy had not been all to pieces, unnerved and half hysterical, she

could no more have laughed at anything about Olympe than she could have cat-called in church. I don't recall that any of us children were taught that we must never laugh at Olympe. And yet, of course, laughing at her has always been one of the major Quilter heresies.

Olympe wheeled about. She was so white that the little dabs of rouge on her cheekbones looked as if they might tumble off. I went and stood close to Lucy.

Olympe said, "Are you laughing at me?"

I tried to tell her that Lucy was not laughing. That she was all to pieces, hysterical, and did not know what she was doing.

"She may not know," Olympe said, "but I know that she is laughing at me. Why? Because I am old, and weak, and no longer beautiful; because my husband humiliates me, and neglects me."

She trailed away then, riding the trimmings on her train. Lucy, of course, burst into tears.

I have gone well around Robin Hood's barn, with all this. I wanted to give you something as a sample, perhaps as an excuse for what I am going to ask you to do.

Judy, I want you to write and insist on having Lucy come to you for a time. Don't hint that it is for Lucy's sake. Lucy is too game to desert. Say that it is for your sake. Say that you need her to help you with Greg—so on. I don't need to dictate your letter, but make it strong. I'll manage her railway fare, somehow or other. She has to get away from here for the present.

She is twelve years old, imaginative and impressionable. We have been fools to leave her alone so much with

Olympe, here of late. I don't need to tell you how brave and sensible Lucy usually is. She will come through even this all right, if we give her half a chance. She won't get the half chance, here, now, with Olympe treating her to scenes like the one last evening, and telling her—the Lord knows what, and making her promise not to tell. The kid has something extra on her mind. And, though Lucy won't tell me, I am darn sure it was Olympe who loaded it there. I couldn't insist that Lucy break a promise. But can you imagine anyone who would be fool enough to add the burden of a secret and a promise to Lucy's troubles right now?

When this afternoon is over—the funeral is to be this afternoon—I am going to Olympe about it. Not that I think it will amount to a hill of beans; but, since we won't be able to get Lucy to you for a week or so, I'll have to get things straightened out for her in the meantime.

She is scared, Judy, Lucy is. When I got her quieted down, last night, I urged her to go upstairs to bed. She wouldn't go. She said that she was lonesome alone, and that she wanted to stay with me. Then, of a sudden, you know how she lights and flashes, she said: "That is a story, Neal. I've turned coward. Please don't tell Grandfather. I am afraid to go upstairs and stay alone in my room."

I fixed her a fine bed, and screened it off from the light, on the sitting-room sofa. And, gosh knows, I shouldn't have thought it strange, even from Lucy, if she had begun to be afraid a bit sooner—the first night or the second. I can't pretend that any of us has been

entirely without something that at least approximated fear. Grandfather has locked the place himself, each night. And, as you know, I have stayed up all night, on guard, every night this week. (Chris offered to spell me, but I've liked the quiet nights for writing to you. I have needed the job badly, so I have liked it.) No, Lucy's fear would have been natural enough, if it had begun sooner. Coming now, it must mean that whatever fool thing Olympe told her yesterday, and made her promise not to tell, has frightened her. With this added to the rest, I am sure you'll agree with me that we must get Lucy right away from here.

Aunt Gracia is in the kitchen attending to breakfast. I'll go and cadge an advance snack, and then I'll ride into Quilterville with this in time to get it off on Number Twenty-four.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

Saturday, October 13, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: We buried Father to-day. To gratify Aunt Gracia, we had the Siloamite ceremony. They did the best they could to re-break our hearts, if that could have been possible. Since mummery is not always ineffective, there should be a law decreeing that no one but a man's enemies be allowed to attend his funeral.

The entire county was there, I think. There were ponderously perfumed flowers, tortured into unnatural shapes, over which furry, caterpillarish-looking letters writhed into words, "At Rest," and such originalities.

When we came home neighbours had been here and had done strange, geometrically unfamiliar things to the rooms, and had left a table spread with an astonishing repast in odd dishes, which we never use. Nothing was lacking, you see, from the best funereal traditions—not even the baked meats. Nothing was lacking, except any sense of the fitness of things, or of the comfort of finality, or the dignity of death, or the realization that we are a supposedly civilized people, living in the year 1900 A. D.

Sorry, Judy. I am not fit to write this evening. I am going to bed to-night. If Chris wishes to keep up this fool night herding he may. I am through.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

CHAPTER XVI

I

Sunday, October 14, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: Dr. Joe came home with us last evening, and spent the night here. This afternoon he talked to Grandfather, Uncle Phineas, Chris, and me.

He had heard from Mr. Ward, who had been to see the insurance people. He said that they were inclined to hedge. They had hoped to have it proved that Father's death was suicidal. Mr. Ward writes, however, that they haven't a legal leg to stand on, and that he thinks he will have the money for us within two weeks.

Grandfather asked me whether I had thought about what you and Lucy and I would do with the money. I had not, of course. I hadn't realized that the money would come to the three of us. I told Grandfather we'd do whatever he advised. He said we should have to think it over. We dropped the discussion there.

This evening, when he got me alone, Chris said, flat, that I should have to let him have five thousand dollars. That is, he said if I'd pay the Brindley mortgage so that he could get another mortgage to the extent of five thousand dollars, that would satisfy him. But, in some way, he had to have at least five thousand at once—

enough for Irene and him to get back to New York and live until he had made a success of his writing. Otherwise, he said, he should be forced to accept the offer he had for selling the place. He was certain that I would understand why he could not ask Irene to remain on Q 2 Ranch. No man, he said, could ask any sensitive woman to continue life in a place where such a horror had occurred.

I said, "Shall we cast lots for the garments, Chris?" and walked away. But it isn't as decent as that. It is refined blackmailing—though I don't know why I modify it.

If we do get the money, he'll get his five thousand, won't he, Judy? Cheap at the price, to be rid of them. The other five thousand will carry us along to safety.

In passing, I wonder whether Irene knew that Chris wouldn't expect or ask her to stay on a place where a horror had occurred? Sorry. That is spite—cad's talk—nothing else.

Thank the Lord we'll get Lucy away from this rotten, spite-ridden, fear-ridden hole before long. I wish we might get Grandfather away for a while, too. He has aged, in the past week. I wish, also, that I could keep him from finding out about this last brash move of Chris's, but I don't know how to do it.

I'm foundered on this writing business, Judy. It is doing no good. I think I shall pass it up. But I do want to tell you that I have decided I was clear off about Grandfather's suspecting me. I surely had a brain-storm, right, there for a few days.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

II

Monday, October 15, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: Your letter in answer to my first one to you came this morning. I'm glad that you think I did right when I told you the truth. But I am sorry that you thought my purpose in writing to you was to gain comfort and consolation for myself.

It is gratifying, of course, to know that you are sure I did not go into Father's room and murder him in cold blood. Gratifying, too, to be assured that you can't believe I murdered Father, not even by mistake for Chris. As a matter of fact, I had reached both conclusions some time ago.

Your judgment, from a few thousand miles of distance, that we were all mistaken about nobody hiding in the house, and, probably, all mistaken about there being no footprints in the snow, is also reassuring. And nothing could be more inspirational than your repeated assertion that, until I come to my senses and realize that no member of the family *could possibly* have done such a wicked thing, I'll be useless as an aid in discovering the real criminal. Too, your persistent demands that I stop being foolish, hysterical, and begin to think calmly and sanely and search for "clues" (Lord, Jude, that searching for clues came near to being the last straw!), and evolve some sensible theory and some reasonable plan of action, have been carefully noted.

Sorry, but to date I have evolved no such theory or plan. However, other members of the family have been less dilatory. I shall give you the two theories in vogue

at present. You may have them to play with, but I should advise against your putting them in your mouth, because, I fear, they might rub off and give you a tummy ache.

The first theory was constructed by Olympe and is, I believe, exclusively her own. It was this theory which succeeded in frightening Lucy—I had given the child credit for much better sense—out of her wits. At Lucy's earnest solicitation, Olympe graciously allowed Lucy to repeat the production to me. The author, modestly, declined a direct discussion of it.

Lucy tells me that she has enlightened you, to some extent, concerning a gentleman unfortunately named Archie Biggil—ex-husband of Irene's. That she has told you of his, perhaps belated, ardency; of his jealousy, his passion, and other interesting emotions. Sweet stuff for a kid like Lucy to have been consuming!

Olympe thinks that this Archie Biggil came, armed to the teeth, with great stealth, in the deep darkness of the night, to Q 2 Ranch. She thinks that he wore a red mask; that he crept into Father's room and shot him, not, as you may be supposing by mistake for Chris—though that, too, would involve one or two minor discrepancies, such as the fact that Archie, not having known of the changed rooms, would have been unapt to make such a mistake—but out of revenge for the unhappiness that Irene had undergone on Q 2.

Olympe advances that Archie, thoroughly provoked, had intended a sort of holocaust, or general slaughter of the Quilters. But, possibly due to his astonishment at having the first murder prove such a noisy under-

taking, he had temporarily, though immediately, desisted. He had rushed into the hall. He had met Irene, who, overcome with some emotion (joy? fright? horror? astonishment?), had experienced but one impulse—to wit, the getting of Archie under cover. She had herded him into the attic. She had locked him in one of her trunks for safekeeping! (Your penchant for underscoring permits me only the modest exclamation point. That sentence bravely deserves more.)

Irene's three large trunks in the attic were locked. They were not searched. They have never, to my knowledge, been searched. Since Olympe has never helped in our searchings, I do not know how she happened to be aware of the locked, unsearched trunks. Evidently, someone has told her of them.

To continue, and to repeat, Irene locked the irritable Archie in one of her trunks and returned below stairs to discover, for the first time, what it was that Archie had been up to. Again, the range of her possible emotions is a wide one. We may assume that her sense of tact soon predominated. Disliking to be involved in the affair, she simply left Archie locked in the trunk. Though, in due time, Olympe seems to prophesy, Irene will relent and unlock Archie.

You may judge what the past week had done to Lucy, when you realize that she could admit junk of this sort into that straight-thinking mind of hers. It makes me ill. Almost as ill as it makes me to wonder why Olympe was so badly in need of a theory that she should proffer this one.

The second theory, given as the joint production of Grandfather and Uncle Phineas, is more ingenuous.

They say they believe that the murderer came to the house sometime shortly after dark, probably while we were all at supper. That he came in the front door and went upstairs. This, I admit, would have been risky, but possible. The front of the house, the hall, the upstairs, were all dark. They have provided the man with a dark lantern of the type that burglars are supposed to carry.

At that time, he could have collected the keys in the upper hall, and gone upstairs to the attic. It was, they think, while he was hiding in the attic that the idea of the rope swung out of the window first came to him. Uncle Phineas makes the picture: The villain crouching, the coil of rope near at hand. He had, so the story goes, while he was making his other plans about locking us all in our rooms, made also his plan of escape. But the coil of rope brought fresh inspirations—a plan for misleading us. He took the rope, crept downstairs again, tied it around the leg of the bed, moved the bed a bit to make us believe that the rope had been used as a means of escape down the side of the house to the ground. He counted on it to send us all rushing from the house in hot pursuit of him. And, they say, but for the snow this plan of his would, probably, have accomplished his purpose. (Yes, you bet. But for the snow. And but for the man's forehandedness in tossing the rope out of the window at least an hour, perhaps two hours before he got around to the shooting.) However,

since the rope had been merely an afterthought, the snow made no difference in his original plan of escape.

This plan, they have decided, must have been to get out of Father's room into some safe, previously arranged hiding place in the house. Why, with us all locked in our rooms, and with no snow to betray him with footprints, he should have planned to stay in hiding in the house, instead of planning to run right down either stairway and out of the house and away, I don't know. The fact that he could not have done this, that Irene was downstairs with the stairway doors locked, need not make any difference in the speculations as to what his original plans may have been. He had not, certainly, planned to have Irene locked out of her room. But Grandfather and Uncle Phineas, wedded to the notion of the rope as a "false clue," insist that, because he wanted us out of the house hunting for him he must have planned to stay in the house.

After the deed, the murderer returned, posthaste, to the attic. He left the attic door unlocked. You may choose your answer to that from the following suggestions:

1. He had left the key in the hardware box by mistake.
2. He thought that an unlocked door would allay suspicion.
3. His hiding place in the attic was so secure that an unlocked door, or two, made no difference to him.

Here, Jude, is where you can come into your own. You are certain that we left some part of the house unsearched. You are right. Until late this afternoon, no one had searched—the roof.

Since the fact that there is no way to get up on the roof except through the trapdoor, directly in the centre of the attic roof and about eleven feet from the floor, seems to bother no one, it need not bother you.

The stepladder, that Monday night when we searched the attic, was nowhere near the trapdoor. There was no box, or chest, or anything else that could have been used to reach the trapdoor, anywhere near it. In answer to Uncle Phineas's question as to whether I could swear that none of these things had been moved beneath the trapdoor and, afterwards, put back into place—of course I could not. I could swear that nothing appeared to be out of place that night in the attic. I could swear that, if any object, large or small, had been directly in the centre of the attic, beneath the trapdoor, both Grandfather and I should have seen it instantly. But, that, also, is of no consequence; because, according to our most popular theory, this is what happened :

The murderer had moved the stepladder, had ascended it, had opened the trapdoor and got out on the roof. Since the trapdoor claps shut when it is not held, he had fastened it open and had left —— What? Why, a rope, of course, dangling. He had then descended the ladder and had replaced it against the wall of the room up there. Next, he had stolen downstairs and committed the murder. He had then returned to the attic, climbed up the rope to the roof, pulled the rope up after

him, and closed the trapdoor. In short, just give that guy enough rope and there was nothing he could not do with it, from fixing "false clues" to climbing eleven feet of it, dangling loose, and excluding, only, hanging himself with it.

Once he found himself on the ten-by-twelve flat piece of roof, he regarded his escape as having been perfectly effected. All that remained for him to do, after that, was to wait until he got ready, climb down his rope again, come down through the house and walk out of it.

In case you don't like to have him walk out through the locked and doubly guarded doors, you may have this: He stayed above, fluctuating between the roof and the attic, for four or five days. That is, until Friday, when we all except Olympe and Lucy had gone to the inquest; or until Saturday, when we all had gone to the funeral. On either of those days, the snow was melted; so he could have got out of a window, or jumped off the roof, or climbed down his rope from the roof—couldn't he?—and walked away.

The question of his food and water for five days has, also, a nice variety of answers. I prefer my own: That he ate his rope, and washed it down with snow water from the roof—the special snow that did not come down through the open trapdoor into the attic. You see, if the trapdoor had been left open for any length of time from ten minutes to two hours, during the snowstorm, there would have been snow or melted snow on the attic floor. Do you think that would have escaped both Grandfather and me when we were searching the attic?

I know that it would not. I know that if anyone had got down off that dirty, wet roof, even once, he would have left footprints on Aunt Gracia's spotless floor up there. The floor that night looked as it usually looks; that is, very much like the bread board.

Unfortunately—I quote the elders—Aunt Gracia this morning thought that the weather was threatening and chose to have Dong Lee (he came home last night, garishly dentilated, politely sympathetic, but, seemingly, unperturbed) hang the washing in the attic instead of in the yard. This necessitated the usual cleaning and dusting of the attic. This late afternoon it was impossible to tell, by coatings of dust or the like, whether ladder, chests, boxes, had been recently moved.

Much as she disliked the admission, Aunt Gracia was forced to say that nothing in the attic seemed to have been disturbed; that no traces, even of the most immaculate intruder, had been discoverable. Said Uncle Phineas, no traces of the criminal were to be found in the attic. Said he, any halfway clever criminal would, of course, have removed all traces before leaving the attic.

Finis, then? The attic itself could scarcely be neater and cleaner than this explanation. All that remains to be explained is why Grandfather, Uncle Phineas, Aunt Gracia, and Chris declare that they credit such sort of stuff. And why do they leave me out in the cold with Olympe, Irene, and Lucy?

Stretching a long, long bow I might give Uncle Phineas and, perhaps, Chris credit for honesty when they declare their belief in this nonsense. I know darn

well that Aunt Gracia does not believe in it, not for one of her clear-sighted seconds. I know that Grandfather cannot believe it; unless—well, Grandfather is eighty years old, and this week has been a week of steady torture for him.

Reverting, again, to your letter. What I seem to have said about attending the hanging of Father's murderer has, apparently, shocked you severely. I was one little bloodthirsty lad, wasn't I, when I wrote that first letter to you? The scarcely gradual tapering of my tone from vengeance to vacuity must prove at least amusing to you. But, at least, I am not a clutching backslider. I state, conclusively, that I no longer have any desire either to discover Father's murderer or to attend any hanging whatsoever. Quite, quite the contrary. I won't subscribe to the darn fool lies the others are propounding. But I'd give the spring heifers if I could concoct some lucid, logical lie that would clear the Quilter family.

You say that I asked you to help me in ferreting out the criminal. That should speak volumes for my own condition at the time I wrote. I judge that the sheer shock of the thing reduced me on the instant to a drooling, chattering idiot—swearing my innocence to you, beseeching for your reassurance. You have given it, Jude; lots of it and lavishly—the reassurance. Shall we let it go at that? But, as for the help, I shall have to change my order. Can you, by any effort of wits, produce the lie we are all so seriously needing at present?

Remember, any compound must include that rope. Do you know, sometimes I almost incline to agree with

Chris's ex-theory—that the rope was, somehow, coincidental. Deserting fiction, for the moment, and attempting fact: Can you think of any conceivable reason that Father himself might have had for tossing that rope out of the window early in the night? Suppose that Aunt Gracia's suggestion about a blackmailer was truer than she thought. Might it have been possible that Father helped him—or anyone—to *get into* his room that night by means of the rope? Someone, with a fair amount of agility, might have been able to get from the ground to the porch roof by means of the porch pillars and the rope. This would have had to be, of course, before the snowfall started. It is at least possible that, since the rope had been effectual for an entrance, it might have been left in place as an exit. The window's having been left open would seem peculiar, on so cold a night; peculiar, but not impossible. The impossible element in any of this is the implication that Father could have been induced to stoop to underhandedness or secrecy of any sort.

Aunt Gracia spoke about unknown paragraphs and pages in men's lives. It went with the jury. Let it go. But it brings us back again to fiction. My thinking machine—I realize that this is in no sense an admission—is not, at present, in working order. You take the rope as a means of access instead of exit and see whether you can produce something that will serve for our present needs.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

CHAPTER XVII

I

Wednesday, October, 17, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: When I wrote to you, day before yesterday, I thought that I was through with this letter writing. I wrote, then, in the rôle of Mr. Wise-guy, scorning you and the rest of the family for not serenely knowing that one of the Quilters was a murdering cur. Scorning even Grandfather; or, if not quite as brash as that, accusing him of senility for using that brave old mind of his to reach for the truth. No use of my trying it; no use of my loyalty to the family being stronger than the absence of footprints in the snow. I was going on nineteen years old, wasn't I? Why shouldn't I be the only wise, honest one in the group? Even poor old Olympe did better than I. She tried to think of an explanation. It was no good, and she was ashamed of it. But she tried, and hoped that Lucy's clear little mind might help with it. Not smart-aleck Neal. He knew. There is no good in raving, Judy. But, gosh, I am so sick of myself that I feel exactly as I did that time when Whatof and I got in a mix-up with the skunk.

No, we haven't found the murderer. But something happened last night that proves, about as clearly as anything but finding him and hearing his confession

could prove, that not one of the family was involved in the dirty business. Go on, Judy dear, crow! You can't crow any louder than I wish I had a right to.

Here is the story: Yesterday afternoon Uncle Phineas left, again, for Portland. This may seem sort of queer to you; but it isn't. I can't explain it, right now. It is a secret that Uncle Phineas and I have had together for a long time. But next week, at the latest, he hopes to be able to tell the family. As yet he hasn't told even Grandfather or Olympe.

I was sorry he couldn't see his way clear to confiding in Olympe, because his going right away again hurt her feelings like everything. He couldn't take her with him on account of our being so hard up for ready money, just now. Uncle Phineas shares Dr. Joe's room in Portland. If he had taken Olympe they would have had to go to a hotel, and we couldn't afford it. All this, then, to explain why Olympe returned to her bed, to stay, after Uncle Phineas left yesterday afternoon.

At six-thirty Aunt Gracia was going to send Olympe's supper tray up to her by Lucy, but I carried it instead. I am darn glad that I did, for now I know what I know. She seemed so forlorn that I sat down and talked to her while she ate her supper.

She was not in a sunny humour. She has been a bit miffed with me, for one thing, ever since I questioned her about the gun. Too, she was all cut up about Uncle Phineas's leaving her alone again, as she said, "at a time like this." She has fully determined that he goes solely and wholly because he cannot bear to be on the place while "that young person," as she calls Irene, is here.

I didn't stay with her any longer than seemed necessary. When she had eaten her supper, she asked me to search her room before I left her alone in it. To humour her, I made a thorough job of it. I looked under the bed and the sofa, in the closet, behind the curtains, and I even opened her old Flemish chest and stirred through it. She asked me, next, to put her wrapper handy, so that she could slip into it when she got up to lock the door after me. I told her that someone would be coming up, directly after supper, to keep her company and then she'd have to get out of bed and unlock the door again. She said that she would not stay a moment alone in the house unless she were certain that every window and door was locked. (I grinned to myself. One of her windows was three inches down from the top, right then, as Uncle Phineas always has it when he is at home. I had left it like that because I thought the fresh air would be good for her headache. That stuffy, purple and brown, verberna and liniment atmosphere that always pervades Olympe's room would give me a headache at any time.) She said, also, that she was in no humour for company this evening. You know Olympe's "Tired, ill, and old" speech—or perhaps you don't. It seems to me that has been devised since you left. At any rate, she was unfit for companionship. She was, as soon as I left her, going to take some of the drops Dr. Joe had given her. She hoped, merely hoped, for a little sleep. So, if I would please, ask the others to walk quietly when they came through the hall on the way to bed?

I promised to deliver the message, took her tray and

went into the hall. I put it on the stand, and went into the bathroom to clean up a bit. As I walked through the hall I noticed—I am certain of this—that all the doors were standing ajar except the attic door, your door, and the door to Father's room. When I came out of the bathroom, I picked up the tray and went downstairs, using the back stairway.

The folks were sitting down to supper when I went into the dining room. I apologized to Grandfather for being late. Dong Lee came in with a tray of muffins, and hung around to hear them praised. Aunt Gracia and Lucy remarked on their excellence. Chris asked how Olympe was feeling. I answered, and delivered her message about quiet in the hall. Irene produced a none too gentle remark concerning Olympe's deafness. Chris, as usual—one does sort of have to feel sorry for Chris at times—tried to cover it with an observation about the mantel clock's being slow. Aunt Gracia thought not, and asked Grandfather for the correct time. Grandfather took out his watch, opened it, said that it was two minutes after seven——

Just at that moment, with every last one of us right there around the dining table, the sound of a gunshot crashed through the house. It was precisely and exactly one too many shots for most of us.

II

The next thing I knew, I was running up the back stairs, listening to a beast growling in my own throat. Since running down the hall, straight to Olympe's room,

was the sensible thing to have done, I can't understand why I did it, then; but I did. I was the first one to reach her door. It was open. I ran into her room. She was in bed. Her night lamp was lighted on the table beside her. She is all right, Judy; don't be frightened. She is as sound as she ever was, untouched by anything worse than a bad scare.

But I did not know it when I ran to her. The others, who came crowding in, didn't know it, either. I thought that, like Father, she had been shot and killed. I thought it so certainly that, when I touched her she felt cold; and, for one wild, red second, I saw soaking blood. I am stopping to tell you this in order to show you what sort of tricks my mind and senses will play on me. It is a lesson about trusting either of them too far. Even yet. I find myself thinking that Olympe is dead, and I have to stop and remember painstakingly that she is not.

I heard Aunt Gracia's voice declaring that Olympe was not hurt. I heard the words, but for all the meaning they conveyed she might have been reciting the multiplication tables. The experience has surely taught me much concerning cowardice. How can a fellow be blamed for anything when fear, through no volition of his, throttles him and robs him of all his faculties? Not, you understand, that I was afraid the fellow was going to pop out from somewhere and shoot me; such a thought never entered my mind, then. I wasn't afraid, either, that he was going to appear and shoot some one of the others. I was afraid of what had happened, I suppose—if you can find sense in that—and not at all of what might happen. I am not starring myself for any of this;

but I am not blaming myself. I couldn't help it any more than I could help it if a boat capsized and chucked me into rapids that I hadn't strength to swim.

The first inkling of my intelligence returned when I heard Irene croak something about Uncle Thaddeus. I turned to look at Grandfather, just in time to see him loosen his hold on the foot of the bed and slip down into a heap on the floor.

Again, don't be frightened. Grandfather is all right now—or, at least, as nearly all right as he could be after having had a second shock of the sort. He won't stay in bed; and he is declaring that it was all nonsense for us to have sent for Dr. Joe. Just the same, I'll be glad to see Dr. Joe put in an appearance here. He's antiseptic, that's what he is. I wish to the Lord he had been here during the fracas yesterday evening.

I am not needing to tell you what seeing Grandfather go under did to us. Even Dong Lee, who had come up with the others, went clear balmy—pushing us away from Grandfather, or trying to, and chattering. Olympe revived, and contributed more than her share to the bedlam. I'll not attempt to describe it; I couldn't, anyway. But when I tell you that, after we'd got Grandfather to the sofa he lay there, looking as if he were dead, and that we could not get his heartbeats, and thought that he was dead, or dying, you will understand why we were not attending to anyone or anything else. You'll understand why, until Grandfather's ruddiness began to seep back into his cheeks, and his eyes were opened and he was talking to us, reassuring us, we did not give a damn if a whole regiment of murderers

were marching, slowly, away from the house. They'd had time to, right enough. It was half-past seven before Chris began his declamation about this being the same thing over again, and his rhetorical questions about what were we doing, and where was the murderer, and so forth—all pyrotechnical rather than practical.

Grandfather, by this time, was sitting up on the sofa with one arm around Lucy and one around Aunt Gracia, both of whom, unromantically, were hic-coughing convulsively. As I looked at them, I had a bright idea. They—all of us—needed police protection.

I stated this idea, and, also, that I was going right then to ride to Quilterville and get Gus Wildoch and a deputy or two. I started off on the run. Grandfather called to me.

"My boy," he said, when I had come back into Olympe's room, "you said that you were going to tell the sheriff what had happened here. Do you know what has happened here? Does anyone know? I do not."

If I looked as I felt, I looked like two fools.

"We heard a revolver shot," Grandfather said. "We came to this room and found that Olympe had, again, fainted. The similarity of this circumstance with that of tragedy proved too much for my strength, I am ashamed to say. Olympe, my dear, did you happen to discharge a revolver by mistake?"

Olympe pulled herself up higher on her pillows, drew her pretty old-rose wrapper about her shoulders, perked up her famous chin, and made it known to all present that she had never yet fired a revolver on any account, either by mistake or purposely, and that, she trusted

she never should. In the midst of death, as it were, Olympe is a gentlewoman. She had just passed through a most terrible experience, and still she found space to resent with dignity what she considered an implication of rowdyism from Grandfather.

Grandfather apologized, and asked her if she had any memory at all of anything that had happened before she had fainted.

I believe that we all thought she wouldn't have. Thank the Lord she did have! It took her a long time to tell it, but what she told was this:

Right after I left her she had got out of bed and locked her door. She had gone immediately back to bed. She was lying there, annoyed because she had forgotten to take her drops while she had been up. She reached for her wrapper, on the foot of her bed, preparatory to rising again, and, just as she did so, she heard a noise at the cupola window—the one I had purposely left open from the top. She turned, and looked across the room toward it. She saw a man, wearing a bright red mask, slowly pushing open her window. She tried to scream, but her throat had closed. She tried to move. She could not. She said that the sensation was precisely the same as one experiences during nightmares. She closed her eyes. She made an effort for prayer. She felt that she was suffocating. She could hear the window being raised slowly, inch by inch. Something, she said, seemed to break in her mind. She thought, "This is what death means." That was the last thing she knew until she opened her eyes and saw us all gathered around Grandfather on the sofa. She thought that the

man in the red mask had come into her room and killed Grandfather.

That was all she could tell us. She had not heard the shot fired. It was enough to tell Gus. A man, wearing a red mask, had climbed to the porch roof and into Olympe's room, through her window. He had fired one shot, and had escaped.

I asked Grandfather if I might go, now, to Quilterville. He said for me to use my own judgment.

Here's a hot one on me, Judy. While I was saddling Tuesday's Child, I had a queer feeling, which I did not entirely recognize. About a quarter of a mile down the road, it introduced itself to me. I was scared. Rather definitely scared, and this time for my own skin. The moon was not up, yet, and there were enough clouds to keep the starlight from being showy. I took the short cut through the oaks, and every falling leaf or creaking branch was the guy in the red mask taking aim at me. Out in the open again, he bounded ahead of me like a pebble skipped over water. And once, disguised as a ball of tumbleweed, he rose up and slew me. For the first time it occurred to me that something more potent than Irene's yelping might have kept Chris from starting off, alone, to Quilterville the night Father was killed.

My fear wasn't based on altogether faulty reasoning. The man had forty minutes' head start on me. If he needed a better start than that, and didn't want the county people on his trail for a while, the smartest thing he could have done would have been to pop me off on the way. Number Twenty-six, eastbound.

goes through Quilterville at three o'clock in the morning. If he had been planning to catch it, he wouldn't have wanted any advance notices. Evidently, though, he had not made any such plans (I think we have given him too much credit for smart planning), because I got into town sound in wind and limb.

Gus Wildoch had gone to bed; and, since he'd had a few drinks too many before he had got there, he was rather nasty. Seemed to think that Q 2 was entirely too troublesome. Also, he appeared to be annoyed because Olympe had not been killed, and unable to discover why I had wakened him for any other reason. When he further discovered that, so far as I knew, we had not been robbed, he washed his hands of the whole circumstance until morning.

I rode over to Al Raddy's and got him to come down and open up the station so that I could send a telegram to Dr. Joe. Then I borrowed Al's gun and rode home again. I was well over my scare by the time I'd got back to the ranch, but I can't say the same for Chris.

He indulged in one of his beautiful tempers when he let me in through the front door and saw that I had come alone. We had a sweet passage, in which he said my failure to bring help was about what he might have expected from me. I made some would-be clever retorts, and was getting pretty hot, when I saw that Chris was using his rage to cover his fright. I came off my perch and asked him whether they had made any alarming discoveries while I had been gone. His reply was worthy of Olympe.

"Alarming enough," Chris said, "to make us certain

that no one's life is safe on this place until we find the man who is, apparently, bent on destroying the Quilter family."

III

After I had left the ranch to go to Quilterville, Grandfather, Chris, and Aunt Gracia had made another thorough investigation of the house.

The bedroom doors were all locked again on the outside, as they had been locked on the night that Father was killed. Again, too, the same doors had been left unlocked—that is, the attic and the bathroom doors. Father's door, this time, had been locked, and Olympe's locked door had been unlocked and left open. (That door unlocked would seem to indicate that the fellow had rushed out of it into the hall. But, there is this: the instant we heard the shot, all of us, except Irene and Chris who came up the front stairway, ran straight up the back stairway and into the upper hall. Would he have run out to meet us? Olympe's door is at the far end of the hall from the attic door.) The seven keys were on Olympe's bedside table, as they had been on Father's bedside table.

The rope, the same old clothes-line, which had been returned to the attic, was on the floor in Olympe's room. It was not tied around the leg of the bed, nor around anything. It was lying there, in a loose coil, near the foot of the bed.

The bullet from the gun had gone into the wall, about three feet above Olympe's pillows. Evidently, he had aimed at her; but his shot had gone wild.

Nothing was out of place in Olympe's room. Exactly as it had been in Father's room—not a chair seemed to have been moved, not a drawer opened.

Lying on the floor, directly beneath the open cupola window, was a mask, large enough to cover a man's entire face, cut roughly out of bright red satin. So, in spite of my surety, it would seem, now, that undoubtedly "red mask" were the words that Father had said to Irene before he died.

Now, to see what we can do with all this. First, the locked doors: There could be, has been, endless speculation about those locked doors. But, finally, they seem to come to but two hypotheses. Either the fellow is up to something of which, as yet, not one of us has begun to get an inkling; or else he is a raving maniac, and his very lack of purpose is what is throwing us all so completely off the scent, and also what is saving him.

I am strong for the second theory—that this is the work of a maniac. A smart man might have locked us all in our rooms that first night. No man, in his senses, would have run the risk of being out in the hall long enough to lock all the doors of the vacant rooms last evening. He had had to collect the keys from the inside of the doors again, and he had had to do it after he had come into Olympe's room through the window. If he knew anything, he must have known that no one was in any of those rooms he so carefully locked. But he repeated, exactly, his first performance; even to leaving the bathroom and attic doors unlocked, and the door of his victim's room standing open.

From first to last, that rope business has seemed the

work of a lunatic. This final move of lugging the thing into Olympe's room, and leaving it there, unattached to anything, is the crowning lunacy.

It doesn't take a maniac, I suppose, to miss his aim. But firing as high as three feet above his mark, when Olympe was lying there unconscious and motionless, seems rather wild for sanity.

Nothing being disturbed in either room appears to establish the fact that the fellow's one motive is cold-blooded murder. As Aunt Gracia said at the inquest, we could grant that Father might have had an enemy. But unless we decide that this man has made up his mind to wipe out the entire Quilter family, which, of course, could be the decision of only a maniac, we cannot conceive of Olympe's having the same enemy—or any enemy, for that matter.

The mask is made of bright red satin. It is about twelve inches long and ten inches wide. It has two small holes cut for the eyes. It has strings, cut from the same satin, knotted into the sides. The strings were tied together in the back, as they had been when he was wearing it. He must then have pulled it off over his head and dropped it, by mistake we assume, just before he got out of the window.

With the exception of Chris, we all believe, I think, that he did get out of the window this time. It was a darn risky business, running along that sloping roof to the rain spout, and getting hold of the spout, under the eaves, on a night as dark as last night was. I shouldn't care to try it in the daytime. But this guy must be something of a circus performer, because he not only

had to get off the roof, but he had also to get on it by means of the rain spout. Chris and I have gone carefully over the porch possibilities. The spout seems to be the one thing he could have used to climb on. The old trellis, at the south end, has completely rotted and fallen to pieces.

Perhaps here I would better give another line or two about the search that Grandfather, Aunt Gracia, and Chris made of the house. They went about it systematically. They did not forget the roof this time. The three outside doors were all locked on the inside, as is usual now. Every window downstairs was locked on the inside. The cellar doors were locked. Chris and I made another thorough search of the place after I got home last night. No one could have been hiding in the house.

This is what Chris thinks queers my maniac contention: He insists that it would take a keen mind to do exactly the same thing, twice, and outwit us each time. Of course, any fool who was willing to risk his neck could have made a clean getaway last night. After the snow melted, we had another freeze, and the ground is so hard that we can't stamp our own footprints down into it. Escape, then, last night—discounting again the distance from the porch roof to the ground, and the dangers of the rain spout as a ladder—would have been simple enough. We know, though, that he did not get away across the roof that first night. We know that the snow was unmarked by any sort of print. Consequently, Chris thinks that the fellow worked again last night whatever foxy scheme he worked the

first time. That is so reasonable that I am more than half ashamed of myself for not agreeing. The rope, the locked doors, and the red mask prove, surely, that it was the same man both times.

The others are beginning to wonder, now, if we might have been mistaken about footprints that first night; if we might have overlooked a single line of them. Lucy, with her ingenious mind, has suggested that he might have got away on stilts! I know that there were no footprints. We have to stick to what we do know, or we shall never get anywhere. Since the man did not get out of the house that Monday night, he must have stayed in the house. Until last night, I have been certain that, since he did not stay in hiding in the house he stayed, as Aunt Gracia said, not in hiding. Or, to put it brashly, he was one of us.

Last night every single one of us was in the dining room, sitting around the table. Dong Lee was serving us. That settles it. It could not have been one of us. Consequently, he did stay in hiding in the house.

All this seems to grant him super-brains and sanity. But I believe it is quite as reasonable to grant him a madman's cunning and a fool's luck. When we find out what he did, where he went that first night, I'll bet ten acres of Q 2 that we'll not find any deep scheming, any genius job at the bottom of it. I'll bet the same ten acres that we'll find something so simple that a child might have devised it, so transparent that we've all looked straight through it without seeing it. I feel, somehow, certain that the entire thing is right before us for us to look at—if only we knew how to look.

How to look seems to be the question now rather than where to look. You know what a wizard Aunt Gracia is when it comes to finding lost articles; and how she always says it is because she never hunts, but always thinks. It is thinking, now, and not peering under beds or into apple bins, that is going to land us where we need to be. In spite of my smartness, I have been trying to do some thinking that includes the trapdoor in the attic; but I haven't had a sensible result, as yet.

Both times we have given the fellow a good many minutes to use as he pleased. But, since we are more or less civilized beings, not entirely inured to tragedy, I suppose it is not wholly to our discredit that our first impulses, on occasions of this sort, should be for something other than an immediate pursuit of the criminal.

Gus and his brothers do not subscribe to such sentimentality. They arrived, fully panoplied, about nine this morning and were at once overcome with disgust to think we had given attention to Olympe and Grandfather last night before we had started hue and cry. Nor did Chris's contention that he had gone straight to the window in Olympe's room, last night, and looked out of it, and seen nothing (the man could have got to the cover of the lower porch by that time), help much.

"Sure, I know," Gus said. "Looking out of windows is all right. But how long did you folks hang around and talk things over this time, before you men thought of going out after the —— —— who did the killing?"

Later, he relented to the extent of admitting that, since he represented law and order in Quilter County, he supposed he'd try to do what he could. He added,

however, that considering all the circumstances, and the time that had elapsed, he didn't think we had a right to expect him to do much.

Aunt Gracia suggested that she thought he should depute at least two men to guard our house for a time.

Gus said, "Would you want them deputies to stay inside the house or outside the house, Miss Quilter?"

Whether or not he was trying to be funny, I don't know. I don't much care. It is relief, I guess. Now, since we all know that not one of us could have had a hand in this, it doesn't seem to matter, greatly, what other people think.

The Wildochs had a talk with all of us—Grandfather was the spokesman, of course—first thing. Then they milled about the place for an hour or two, and made a great show of examining Olympe's room. She is still in bed, so we curbed their enthusiasms for detail as much as we could; postponing, for instance, the minutia of digging the bullet out of the wall. When they finally left, Gus said that he would see what he could do about sending a couple of the boys out for a few days. No one has come, as yet, so he must have seen that he could do nothing.

Don't, for the Lord's sake, Judy, go worrying about our safety. Unlike Gus, we are able to do several things. Chris and I are both staying up to-night, for all night. The happy practice of feeding Whatof and Keeper in the kitchen shed has been discontinued. The house is locked from cellar to attic. We are getting our fresh air from the fireplace flues, and our strength is as—and so forth. No kidding, it makes a difference.

I guess this tells it all for to-night. Except sorry, and so on, for that fool letter I wrote to you yesterday. And, Judy, don't forget about sending for Lucy, pronto. If we do get the money from Father's insurance, I am going to try to think of some scheme for getting Grandfather away for at least a few weeks. Lucy and Grandfather are the only ones here whom I am worried much about. The others seem to be coming through pretty well. Olympe, I am sure, will be all right as soon as Uncle Phineas gets home. Thank fortune, when he comes this time, he'll be able to stay.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

Thursday, October 18, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: You are a good kid, all right, but somehow or other your letters seem to rub me the wrong way. For gosh sakes, Jude, stop telling me that I didn't murder Father. If you keep on with that line, I'll think, as I thought for a while about Chris and Irene, that you are protesting too much. After all, you can't *know* that I didn't do it, as you keep declaring with underlines. Nobody here *knows*—anything. How can you know, away off there in Colorado?

It serves me right enough, for beginning this crazy, underhanded business of writing to you. The nights were long, and I had to have something to do, I guess, and the letters gave me a good excuse for writing, as Olympe says, "at a time like this." Funny, how we'll find excuses for ourselves. Funnier, how we'll believe what we desire to believe. I don't know what right I have to the plural. No matter; don't stop, too long, to laugh over the humour I have just presented. I have something much more amusing to give to you.

Olympe had supposed that Uncle Phineas would come with Dr. Joe from Portland this afternoon. (Dr. Joe had been out of town and hadn't got my

telegram until late Wednesday.) When Uncle Phineas did not come, her fury propelled her from her bed and downstairs in her black gown—by this time fully denuded of its festive colour.

At seven this evening, Lucy came to me and asked me to come upstairs with her. She led me directly to Olympe's room. Lucy is so choice, that I am going to attempt to quote her, as nearly as I can.

"Neal," said she, "I have something to tell to someone, and I have decided that, just now, you are probably the best one of the family to tell."

Said I: "To tell what?"

Said Lucy: "To tell that I am very sure no man with a red mask came to Olympe's room on Tuesday night. Ever since I decided to be an author, Grandfather has been training me to observe closely. Now, Neal dear, will you please observe with me?"

She asked me to lie down on Olympe's bed, where Olympe had been lying on Tuesday night. She had the night lamp lighted and on the table as it had been that night. She crossed the room, stood in front of the window, and asked me whether I could see her white face.

I could not. The night lamp, shaded as it is, lights a small circle on the bedside table, and lights nothing else.

I heard her open the window. "I am sitting in the window now," she said, "with the pane pulled down between you and me. Does the glass make a difference? Can you see my white face?"

I could not.

"Then how," she asked, "could Olympe have seen a man, and the bright red mask, at this same time on

Tuesday night? Now listen," she went on. "When I bang the window up hard, like this, you can hear it? But can you hear it when I raise it slowly, like this, inch by inch?"

Since it made no sound whatever, I could not.

"You see," Lucy stated, "Olympe said that the window being raised, slowly, inch by inch, was what she heard to make her look toward it. She kept on hearing it, raised inch by inch. I can't hear it myself, when I'm raising it slowly. You can't hear it, over there. Olympe is, really, a trifle deaf."

Neal shines. Neal is brilliant. "Just the same, Lucy, we all of us heard the shot. There is no arguing away from that."

Lucy grows maternal. "Yes, Neal darling, of course. But, you know, I think that Olympe fired the shot herself. You see, she always slept with Uncle Phineas's gun under her pillow when he was away from home. She kept it unloaded—or meant to. But the cartridges for it are right here in the commode drawer, where you found them the other night. Olympe could have put just one of them into the gun, and got into bed, and shot it off up there into the wall, where she knew it would stick and not hurt anyone. Then she could have jabbed it back under her pillow, and plumped right down into bed again. If we had searched for a gun, this time, and we didn't, none of us would have thought it odd if we'd found the unloaded one under her pillow where she always kept it."

"At least not as odd," I said, "as I think it is for you to accuse Olympe of this. Why are you doing it, Lucy?"

"I'll tell you my purpose in a minute or two," Lucy said. "First, I should like to get through with my thinking. I think that Olympe's reason for planning to do this was that Uncle Phineas went away and left her alone, when she kept telling him she needed his protection. Uncle Phineas, of course, will be shocked and remorseful when he finds how nearly Olympe did come to being killed. And, too, you know, Neal, Olympe has been sort of left out of things since Father was killed. Being almost killed herself, gives her an entrée. We know that is the way Olympe is made, and that she can't help it at all—not any more than she can help being rather dull.

"The mask was cut from one of Olympe's old ball gowns that I used to dress up in, in the attic. The trouble is, some little snips of it were here in her work basket, and some threads of it were still caught in her dull scissors. I thought it wise to look, because Sherlock Holmes was always making such important discoveries with bits of tweed, you know. Now, I think, I can tell you my purpose. I want you to explain to Olympe, Neal. She must be explained to, and I think it would be much better taste for you to do the explaining than for me, at my age, to attempt it."

"Explain—what, Lucy?" I was shocked at the way I croaked it.

"But, Neal! You must explain to her that the man jumped quite heavily into the room from the window. That he came gliding across the floor, and stooped to glare, or peer, or some such thing, at her, beneath the lamp. That she took one horror-stricken glance at the

Charlotte Corday in mind, or some other fearless lady. Yes, Neal, I know it is very silly. But, you see, Olympe lives in this very silly world that she makes for herself—I mean, really lives in it all the time.

“I fancy, when she took the revolver from her dress, that Father just lay there and laughed at her. You know what laughing does to Olympe. You saw her the other night, when I laughed. And so, quite carried away with her acting, as she does get, you know, she pulled the trigger of the gun. She never thought that it would—but it did—go off. She must have been dreadfully shocked and frightened. She ran straightway back to her room, and fainted.

“Of course, she’d have had to be a little crazy ever to have begun any of that—or to think she could point a revolver at Father and get a promise. And I thought such a horrible accident might have made her a little more crazy. And I thought—I’m afraid this is not clear thinking, though—that suppose she’d suspect I had guessed the truth. And I know, Neal, this was silly of me; but I couldn’t keep from being afraid she might play another scene, and have another accident.”

Why, I asked, if Olympe had had no idea of using her gun, if she had thought that it was unloaded, had she locked us all in our rooms before she had gone into Father’s room?

“I think,” Lucy answered, “that she didn’t. I think that, when Irene came upstairs and found Christopher had locked her out, it vexed her so much that she slipped along the hall and locked all the doors—just to make

trouble in the morning. You know, she told me herself that she locked the stairway doors to show Christopher that two could play at that lock-out game."

"Do you think, Lucy, that Irene could have opened all of our doors, removed the keys, and locked us in without our hearing her?"

"I think she could have with all of us but Grandfather. If Grandfather had heard someone fumbling at his door, he would have supposed it was some one of the family, and, while he might have called a question, he might not have. If he had thought some one of us was trying to do something or other to his door without disturbing him, it would be just like Grandfather to be too courteous to let us know he had been disturbed."

"And you believe that Grandfather would lie about it, afterwards?"

"That is wrong of you, Neal. But I do think that Grandfather might be generous rather than just. Since he didn't know that it was Irene who took his key, he might think it more generous not to say that he suspected her. Since Grandfather would die, as you know, to save the Quilter honour, surely he would keep silent to save it."

"All right. How did the keys get into Father's room?"

"Perhaps Irene had them with her, in her wrapper pocket, when she came back upstairs after she heard the shot."

"And why did she, from the very start, lie about locking the doors?"

"I thought," Lucy said, "that she didn't like to con-

fess she had been the one to lock us all in. Everyone seemed to think that whoever had locked us in had committed the murder."

"All right. Can you answer this? When Irene locked us all in our rooms, wouldn't she have locked Olympe in her room, too?"

"She might have locked Olympe in Father's room."

"Only," I protested, "when Irene opened Father's door to get his key, wouldn't Olympe and Father both have seen her?"

"If Father's key had not been in the keyhole," Lucy answered, "Irene might have heard voices in his room, and not have opened the door. She might have locked it with one of the keys she already had."

"Very well. You have locked Father's door. How did Olympe get out of it, after the shooting, and into her own locked room again?"

"If Father's key had been in some handy place, she might have used it to unlock the door, and to open her own door, and to lock her own door after her, again. Or, Olympe, when she went into Father's room, might have turned the key in the lock. It would have made a gesture, and a speech. She might have held the key in her hand, and have shown it to Father, and told him that, until she had his promise, neither of them could leave that room. Irene's locking was just naughtiness. If Father's door had been locked on the inside, she wouldn't have bothered about it. She'd have locked the others and gone on downstairs."

"And the rope, hanging out of the open window?"

Judy, on the square, I fully expected the kid to have

some logical, well-thought-out explanation of the rope. I have spared you a description of my own mental processes during this interview with out little twelve-year-old sister. I have assumed that your imagination would be more competent than my powers of description. Well, thank the Lord, the baby stuck at the rope.

"Could it be," she questioned, "that Olympe had threatened to hang herself out of the window with the rope?"

"Or to hang Father?" I suggested.

"I know," she agreed, and blushed, "that is bad. That is allowing my literary imagination to run away with my logic. No, Neal, I can't explain the rope. There is a chance that Father had wanted to get someone into the house that night, and had fixed it to help him in. Grandfather has told me about other incidents, that life allows such coincidences—I mean as Father having fixed the rope on the same night that he was shot by accident—but that literature does not. This is life—so that might be. Or it might be that Father had lowered something out of the window that night; something heavy that would have pulled the bed a bit. If he had done so before the snow was on the ground, whoever was below to receive it could have taken it and walked right away, or wheeled it in a barrow, and the snow would have covered any footprints or barrow tracks."

"And Father, who had gone to all that trouble for secrecy, would have lowered his treasure chest out of the window, and have gone back to bed, leaving the

window wide open for the wind to blow over him, and the rope dangling to be seen?"

Lucy argued: "The rope couldn't have been seen until morning. Father might have had some reason for leaving it as it was for a few hours. Perhaps someone was going to send something up again—and couldn't when he realized that the snow would show the footprints in the morning. Father would have closed the window. But Olympe might have opened it, at the last minute. She might have thought she'd throw the gun out of it. And then, when she saw the snow, and realized how a black gun would show in the white snow, changed her mind."

"By the way, Lucy, why did Father say 'red mask' to Irene?"

"If he did say it, I think he said it to save Olympe. He'd wish to, you know. He'd have been sure that Olympe did not mean to shoot him."

"Have you decided what heavy thing it was that Father lowered out of the window, and to whom he lowered it?"

"I had thought," Lucy answered, "that you might know that. I had thought it might have something to do with the secret you and Uncle Phineas have been keeping together. I thought Uncle Phineas, since no one knew where he was the night Father was killed, might have been under Father's window."

As it happens, Judy, that is utter idiocy. Ruled out. A good many persons know exactly where Uncle Phineas was that night. We shall all know it, before long now. I told Lucy this. She remarked that she was glad.

I told her, next, that this mistake of hers should be a lesson to her concerning how easily mistakes could be made in matters of this sort. (That sounds like me and my heavy platitudinous, pedagogic style. Odd, the continuation of Lucy's devotion.)

She asked me what other mistakes she had made.

I explained to her that, though she had worked her problem neatly, she had not got the right answer because she had left out an important equation—the human equation. I asked her, if Olympe had actually planned to go through with such a scene in Father's room, what her first thought would have been.

"To dress up for the part," said Lucy. "But I decided that she had undressed, again, before we found her in her outing-flannel nightgown."

"Very well," I said. "But examine this. Would Olympe leave Father, mortally wounded, run to her room, get out of her costume, hang it in the closet—it was not strewn about her room—put on her nightgown, take the gun again into her hand, and fall in a dead faint on the floor? Not only would she have done all that, but also could she have done all that before she fainted?"

"I should think," said Lucy, "since she did miss meeting Irene in the hall, there'd have been plenty of time, after that."

"Narrow it down," I insisted. "Would Olympe, if she had shot Father by mistake, have left him alone to suffer and die? Remember, Lucy, that in spite of her artificiality, Olympe is a good woman."

"Do you mean," Lucy gasped, "that Olympe shot Father on purpose?"

"I mean," I said, "you little nonny, you, that Olympe did not shoot Father at all. I mean, that it has been wrong of you to think these thoughts."

"Doubtless," she sighed, in that seldom-used, grown-up manner of hers. "But I have decided that I must have a wicked personality. I have broken all the rules of conduct Grandfather gave to me. But at least, Neal, I am logical."

I told her that if deciding one of the family was a murderer, or, at best, a brutal beast or a coward, and that all the rest of the family were scamps and liars was an evidence of logic, she was logical right enough.

"Whom have I accused of lying?" she asked.

"Begin with Chris. He said, under oath, that he did not lock Irene out of their room that night."

"I didn't hear him say it. But, even so, I'd call that a very light lie—a lie that any gentleman should be willing to use to get a lady out of serious trouble, especially since the lady was his wife."

"And what serious trouble was Irene in?"

"But, Neal, she was the only one of the family who was locked out in the hall."

"Lucy," I questioned, "whom have you been talking to?"

"Really, only to myself," she said. "But I've pretended to be talking to Sherlock Holmes. I have been Dr. Watson for days now—whenever I have felt at all up to it. It is an excellent way to clear one's mind, Neal. Why don't you try it, dear?"

I told her that I didn't care for the sort of clear brain that could clean out a good woman's character in a

swoop and leave a bad woman, a woman rotten to the core. I asked her if the second affair had not come up, how long she had planned to keep this mad belief of hers, that Olympe had done the murder, a secret?

"I had meant," she replied, "to keep it forever. It seemed best. You'd think, Neal, that keeping it would have been quite easy. No. It hasn't been."

You'll hate me for this, Judy, I suppose. It was beastly of me, I know. But I'd thought that Lucy needed a lesson. And—why not be honest?—I love the working of the kid's mind. I am as proud as a parent when I get a peek at the way it goes. But that final little, "No. It hasn't been," of hers, got the best of me.

I told her then what I should have told her in the beginning, and what she had had no opportunity to know without being told, since she was not at the inquest: That the bullet, which Dr. Joe had removed from Father's body, had been fired from a .38 Colt's of fairly recent make. That Uncle Phineas's old Colt's was a .32 calibre. That he left it at home, now, when he went on prospecting trips, because he had the new .38 that he bought a couple of years ago when Father and Grandfather bought theirs of that man who came around on a bicycle taking orders for them.

"Was the kind he sold the kind that killed darling Father?" Lucy questioned.

"Yes. And every man who has a gun in three counties has one of them. We can't get far with that; but far enough to prove that a .38 bullet cannot be fired from a .32 gun."

"I had thought," Lucy said, "that Uncle Phineas went to the city. You and I telegraphed there."

I told her that before long now she'd know where Uncle Phineas had been; and, until she did know, it would be more polite to stop guessing about it.

"I only meant," she explained, "that, if Uncle Phineas had gone to Portland, and not prospecting, he probably wouldn't have taken his new .38 Colt's with him."

For a wonder, I understood what she meant. It proves again, plainly, my contention that guns, ropes, coal oil, and their ilk are worthless, worse than worthless, when it comes to finding the truth in a case of this sort.

"Very well, Lucy," I said. "If you can believe, after having known Olympe all your life, that she would run away from Father, whom she really loved, when he was lying there with blood streaming from his breast, dying—run away, hide a gun so that it could never be found, get out of her clothes, and the rest of it, with no thought of anything but saving herself—it wouldn't help you much to tell you that Uncle Phineas did have his gun with him, his .38 Colt's, on that trip. I took it out of his valise myself, when I helped him to unpack."

Lucy looked at me, drew in a long breath, and burst into tears. For a moment I thought they were tears of relief. Not so.

"It was so much better," she sobbed, "to think that Olympe did it by accident. None of the rest of us could have done it by accident. And, besides, nothing is real to Olympe. Neal—Neal—— See, now—the rest of us!"

She said it, Judy. The rest of us. The more I think of it, the more I am certain that Lucy is right, absolutely right, about Olympe's little drama of Tuesday evening. It is all perfectly evident. But I do not believe that Olympe staged it either to spite Uncle Phineas or to get the centre of the stage. I know that she is too good a woman to have yielded to the temptation for no better reasons than these. I think that she thought the act would do just what it did do, for me at least. That it would remove suspicion from every member of our household.

Damn it all, Jude! Why didn't I think of something of the sort? Why didn't any other one of us? Do you get the irony of it? Olympe, the one person here on the ranch—I suppose we should have to except Irene, also—who would have bungled it hopelessly was the one person who thought of the scheme. If Chris, or Aunt Gracia, or I had possessed wits for the conception, we'd have had wits for carrying it through convincingly.

I don't know whether or not I have been the one fool of the household. If any of the others have doubted Olympe's story, they have not betrayed their doubt by the flicker of an eyelash. Though, of course, Grandfather doubted it from the beginning. His first question, I am sure I told you, was whether Olympe had discharged a revolver by accident. That, too, explains his reluctance to having me ride immediately to Quilterville. Also, when the county bunch arrived, Grandfather had them come directly to his room. He said that Olympe was in no condition to be troubled with questions. You see, he wished to tell Olympe's story for her.

And when I heard him telling it, "Mrs. Quilter was aroused from her sleep, on Tuesday evening, by hearing a noise in her room. She opened her eyes and saw a man creeping toward her; a man whose face appeared to be covered with the red mask we have since found. She fainted from terror——" I merely thought that he had been too much fuddled at the time to get Olympe's story entirely as to detail.

It seems to me, now, that Chris did flash an odd glance while Grandfather was telling Olympe's story. If I am right about that, it might easily mean that Chris thought as I thought concerning Grandfather's befuddlement. Because I have dreaded it, I suppose, I have imagined, once or twice, that Grandfather was getting less keen here of late. He is not. This proves it. Or, if he is, he could lose about half of his intelligence and still give us all cards and spades.

This, then, Judy, so far as I am concerned, is the end of it. We are back where we began, the night of Father's murder. I am through. I am not writing any more of these Mr. Micawber epistles. I don't know who the murderer is. I don't want to know. You don't know. I don't want you to know. So, no more brain storms, no more nervous palpitations, no more fake jubilations, and but one more apology—sorry, Jude, that I ever began any of this rot—from,

Your loving brother,

NEAL.

CHAPTER XIX

I

Saturday, October 20, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: I have what two weeks ago would have been mighty good news for you and for us all. Uncle Phineas got home this afternoon with \$45,000 marked in his bank book. That is, you understand, he had deposited a check for \$45,000 in the Portland bank.

When he went prospecting down into Malheur County last June, he went into the old placer-mining region. He located a quartz mine there. He came home in August, and went straight on to Portland to try to interest some Eastern capitalists, who were there at that time, in the mine. He succeeded. And, finally, in late September, he got two big bugs to go down to Malheur County with him to inspect the property.

They were coming out, on their way back to Portland to draw up the papers and close the deal, when Uncle Phineas heard what had happened here on Monday night, October the eighth. He came straight home, as you know. But he made an engagement to meet the men in Portland, toward the end of the week. This is his reason for going back to the city this last time. Everything

went through without a hitch. Uncle Phineas banked the \$45,000.

So, you see, all is smooth sailing from now on. With that amount, we can bring the ranch through with flying banners, or I am a fool. Yes, I know. But I am not a fool where ranching, and nothing else, is concerned. Though when I realize what Father could have done, if he'd had half such an opportunity as this, it makes me meek. Also, it makes me pretty sore at Uncle Phineas. If it hadn't been for his darn foolishness, I'd have had a chance to know something, at least, about how Father would have planned to go ahead with such an amount of capital: how he would have expended it; saved it; what mortgages he would have paid. As it is, I am in the dark with a case of cold feet at the notion of so much money to be handled.

On the square, Judy, I hated this doggone secrecy of Uncle Phineas's from the beginning. When he came home last summer, he told me about the location of the mine, what the ore had assayed, the accessibility to the railroad and to water. It sounded so good that, in spite of myself, and in spite of past experiences and even—shall I say—in spite of Uncle Phineas, I had to believe in the future of the thing.

I was strong for telling the rest of the family, or at least some of the rest of them, right then. He would not have it. He had used me as a safety valve, because he had to confide or explode; but he would not tell another soul. He insisted, rightly enough, on the difference between locating a gold mine and getting a red cent out of it. On the score of not building up the family's hopes,

only to dash them, he did have a fair excuse for keeping quiet and for requiring that I should. But I knew, and he knew, that at any other time in the history of Q 2 Ranch, he would have come shouting in with the big news, and allowed us all to have what fun we could out of the hoping and planning—you know how it has always been. No, sir, it was not fear of disappointing the family that made Uncle Phineas swear me to secrecy.

It is a crumby thing to say, but, from the night she came here, Uncle Phineas has hated Irene. He always liked Chris better than he liked any of us, you know; so a mixture of Mother, Beatrice, and Griselda would not have satisfied him for his precious boy. Admittedly, Irene possessed no such combination of perfections. He was—and is, I suppose—convinced that Irene had roped his cloyingly innocent nephew by foul means. He thought all he had to do was to free Chris from the lasso of propinquity, and then the infatuation would instantly end. He tried to toll him off to Nome. When he had to give over that plan, he decided that Irene, if she saw no chance of getting away from Q 2 with Chris, would pick up some day and leave without him. He never for a moment believed that Chris would sell the place. His point, all along, was to save Chris. Mine, when I got mixed up with some mucky ideas of the same sort, was to save the ranch.

Well, Uncle Phineas has saved the ranch. So I guess it is rotten of me to start quibbling about his methods. If he did make rather a bad mistake, he was more than paid out for it by the fiddle-de-dee effect of his triumph this evening. His announcement, with his display of the

bank book, was the forlornest victory I have ever witnessed.

We are a sentimental herd, and there is no getting away from it. When Uncle Phineas flashed the \$45,000 on us, there wasn't one of us, except Irene, I suppose, who thought of anything but what that money, or a tenth of it, would have meant to Father these last few years.

He sprang it on us just after we'd sat down to supper. We received it as we might have received an announcement that he had had his photograph taken; and we passed the bank book from hand to hand as we might have passed the picture, though rather more quietly.

Of course, I had been more or less expecting it. Though I was not prepared for any such sum as that. He had told me he was going to hold out for \$45,000; but I had \$15,000 fixed in my mind as the highest figure. One does, you know, always divide by at least three when it comes to Uncle Phineas and his affairs. Still, since I had been primed, I don't know why I should have been so dumb. I might have sounded forth a glad cry or two, it would seem, but I did not.

Lucy was the first to speak. She remarked: "Dear me! An enormous amount of money. Money was bothering all of us—wasn't it—only a few weeks ago?"

Chris replied by shoving back his chair, rising, and walking out of the room. Irene ran after him. Olympe burst into real tears. Aunt Gracia ran to Grandfather and put her arm around his shoulders.

"Don't you understand, Father," she said, "Uncle Phineas has brought us a fortune? All our money worries

are over now. You must be glad, dear. You must be glad!"

So take the "good news," Judy. In spite of the neat blue figures in the little leather book, I think none of us has quite got hold of the idea as yet. Except—funny, how often I have to make this exception—except, then, Irene. She has got Chris at their packing already—but a far from sunny, rather new Christopher, who snaps at one, and is surly, and who says that he will pack, if she likes her things put away in trunks, but that he is not leaving Q 2 for a while.

Olympe is having a difficult time. She is torn between remorse for having accused Uncle Phineas of iniquities, widely assorted from neglect to infidelity, and anger at him for having kept the secret from her for so long a time.

Poor Aunt Gracia seems to be in a trance. When you consider how hard it is to think up excuses and decent motives for mere mortals, you can imagine what a task it must be to have to find them for Omnipotence. You understand? If Father had to die, on the very night of October eighth, death would have been so much easier for him if he could have known that he was leaving us all, and Q 2, safe. So, until Aunt Gracia's faith reconciles this seeming brutality with some obscure justice, she is bound, I fear, to have a bad few days.

Grandfather has received the glad tidings by going straight to his bed. Aunt Gracia seems seriously concerned about him. But I know Grandfather, by this time. After weathering the past twelve days, as he has, he won't allow what, after all, is good fortune, to down him now.

Uncle Phineas put my name in the pot when he made this deposit. In the future, I am to write checks with the elders. I'll celebrate by making my first one out to you, and enclosing it in this letter. Thank the Lord you can stop worrying about expenses. If you haven't plenty of room for Lucy, where you and Greg are now, find a larger, more comfortable place. Or, if there is anything at all that will make you happier—get it.

Your loving brother,

NEAL.

II

Tuesday, October 23, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: Bless your heart for the letter that came to-day. None of the folks see my hand in it. They are all a bit worried, in spite of your denials, for fear Greg may be not so well. But, to the last man, they are relieved beyond measure at the prospect of getting Lucy away from this damnable, suspicion-ridden hole that used to be Q 2 Ranch, and safely with you.

It is being no end good for Lucy. The notion that Judy-pudy needs her has chirked her chin up almost to its erstwhile snobby slant. She drank milk at dinner for the first time in ages. I knew why—strength for efficiency. She is as busy as six bunnies getting her washing done, and her clothes in order, and preparing "presents" for you and Greg.

We'll get her off on Thursday, I think. I'll send you full details about trains in a telegram on the day she leaves here. For gosh sakes, Judy, don't let there be any slip up about meeting her. I hate like thunder to

have to allow the kid to make the trip alone. If Grandfather were only in a little better shape, I'd bring her, or Aunt Gracia might. If Chris and Irene had any definite date for departure, we'd have her wait for them. But, since Chris—and quite rightly—doesn't care to leave Q 2 until Grandfather is out of bed, I suppose we'd better send Lucy along.

If, by Thursday, Grandfather should be up again as, in spite of Dr. Joe's pessimism, I rather think he may be, I'll hop the train and escort Lucy to Denver. Or, if he seems well out of the woods, by to-morrow or the next day, we may have Lucy wait and go with Chris and Irene. Don't worry, if I have to wire that she is coming alone. I'll make friends with the conductor, and endow the porter.

Thank you, dear, for helping out.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

III

Wednesday, October 24, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: If I weren't sure it would make things worse instead of better, I should devote the first page of this letter to an alphabetical classification of Neal Quilter, beginning with ass, bounder, cad, dunce—it is remarkably easy—and ending with wise-guy, yap, and zany.

This, of course, as a direct result of your ten-page letter, which came to-day, in answer to my letter about the coroner's inquest. The entire plan of writing to you, as I did write, could have been conceived only by an

idiot—and the sound, fury, and significance have been fittingly evinced.

Your attitude is the one reasonable attitude. I deserve every bit of the big-sisterly sweetness, sympathy, reassurance, and comfort that you are so determined to lavish upon me. I deserve it all; but I am afraid that I can't endure much more of it. Jude, we have to cry quits.

I do not, and I never did, suspect Aunt Gracia nor Chris. Whatever brain storm I had, has passed. I know, with no further need of reassurance, that I am an innocent little lad. For gosh sakes, then, Jude—stop it! I am not fool enough to ask you to forget what I have written; but, if you can, forgive it; and, because you must, ignore it.

In answer to your question, do as you think best about telling Lucy that I have told you the truth. I have no right, and no particular desire, to burden you with keeping your knowledge a secret from Lucy. But I certainly do advise that you girls think of the affair as little as possible; that you two spend no time in putting your heads together and puzzling. It is a dog-gone unhealthy occupation, even for a man. The less you kids think about it and talk about it, the better.

Dr. Joe—he came out again on Sunday—got word to-day from Mr. Ward that the insurance people have decided to fight our claim on the grounds of suicide. They base their lying contention on the supposition that the Quilters, unwilling to have a suicide in their family, eager to collect, illegally, a large sum of money, would have banded together to dispose of the weapon,

and to make the death seem to have been murder. Mr. Ward wishes to fight it through to a finish. He says that they are a rotten, one-horse, almost one-man, shyster outfit, with no standing, and they should be shown up and forced out of business. He says that the absence of powder burns proves, conclusively, that the gun had been fired from a distance of at least five or six feet. Again, bother ropes, and masks, and coal oil, and powder burns—or the lack of them. I know that Father would not kill himself. I do not know how they could tell whether or not there were powder burns, underneath all that blood—— There I go again. Sorry.

What I began to say was, that this decision of the company's puts us in a nasty position. The Scylla of allowing them to get away with their filthy claims, and the Charybdis of dragging the thing through the courts, and of seeming eager to make Father's death a paying proposition.

We'll do nothing until Grandfather is able to give us his best advice. At present, Dr. Joe and Uncle Phineas are all for fighting the thing through. Chris is, or seems to be, on the fence with Olympe and Irene; Aunt Gracia and I are strong for dropping it, here and now.

Grandfather is not coming along as well as I wish he might. I think that it is mostly a general letting down and relaxation, after shock. The money sort of gave him an opportunity to rest. However, Grandfather is much hurt because Uncle Phineas had not told him about the mine, or asked his advice about any of the dealings.

Uncle Phineas tried to get square by explaining that

he was afraid Irene and Chris might have the same ability he—Uncle Phineas—had for turning daydreams into realities. In that case, had they known that a gold mine was in the offing, they might have hied them to New York on the strength of their knowledge.

This helped not at all. Grandfather inquired why Uncle Phineas thought that he would go directly to Irene and Christopher and inform them. He went on to say that, in all his life, he had never betrayed a secret. His voice fairly shook as he all but dared any one of us to mention one instance of his having repeated the most trivial thing that had been told him in confidence. He said that, at eighty years of age, the discovery that his own brother dared not trust him with a minor confidence was an immitigably painful revelation. Sound enough, sane enough, just enough; but from Grandfather, at this time, rather thoroughly appalling.

Aside from Grandfather, the rest of us are doing fairly well. The money assuages a lot. And the thought of getting Lucy away from this hellish place is a comfort. According to present plans, she is to leave to-morrow. But you will have my telegram about that long before you have this letter.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

IV

Thursday, October 25, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: I hope you won't think that I am in the throes of another brain storm, when you get the two almost identical telegrams about Lucy's departure and

arrival. After I had sent the first, I remembered the time the telegram we sent to Chris had miscarried. So I thought I'd play safe, and send another.

It was darn crummy business, starting Lucy off alone on the train to-day. Nothing but the thought of Grandfather, lying there in his darkened room at home, kept me from hopping the train at the last minute and going with her.

Grandfather is not pulling through as fast as I thought he would. He was able to talk to me for a while this morning, though Dr. Joe keeps time on us. Grandfather asked me, straight, about the insurance. I told him how things stood. He advised, strongly, that we drop the claim. He said that no one, now, including the insurance people themselves, believed for an instant that Father's death was a suicide. But, he said, by the time we had aired the affair in court, and had allowed those scoundrels to present their dishonest evidence, there was no way of telling what some people might come to believe. He said that Father's honour needed no defence, and that we would make none. He added that no retort we could offer would carry the dignity of non-retort.

I can hardly say how thankful I am for this decision from Grandfather. To start yowling and yapping for insurance money would seem to be the final, filthy flourish. Thank the Lord that Uncle Phineas has made it possible for us to drop it. Or, I guess, I should say that Chris has made it possible for us to drop it.

After Grandfather and I had talked this morning, he insisted upon seeing Chris this afternoon. Chris,

strangely, or naïvely, told me all this himself. Grandfather put it up to him whether we should fight for the insurance money or not. He said that, unless Chris would give him his solemn promise that never again, under any conditions, would he consider selling the ranch, we should have to go to suit for the money. Grandfather's position was, that though now we are in bonanza, if every few years we had to meet the same proposition we had to meet when Chris came home this spring, we'd need, and we should have to attempt to get, every red cent we could put our hands on. Chris promised like a shot. Judging from Chris's account of the interview, Grandfather made a very impressive, almost but not quite Biblical ceremony of receiving the promise.

So that is off our minds. Chris never would break a promise. He'd have smashed us to bits by selling us out; but he'd never so much as trifle with the pretty knickknack of his own punctiliousness. I am darn glad of it. Why I should be beefing about it, I don't know.

This small check I am enclosing is to be used, exclusively, for the funny little fleshpots you and Lucy delight in. I fear I have been remiss about sending messages to Greg; but I am certain that you have been delivering, promptly, all the pleasant things I should have said. I am better than that. I am certain that Greg would know that I meant them, whether I had sent them or not. I am a mucker with messages—but you know how I feel about Greg.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

V

Saturday, October 27, 1900.

DEAR JUDY: Thank you for the telegram that came this evening. I went to Quilterville about five and hung around over there for three hours waiting for it. If people's bumps of sympathy were developed in proportion to their bumps of curiosity, living would be a more tolerable project. Not, Lord knows, that I bid for sympathy, or want it—that is, unless sympathy might be expressed by decent silence.

No matter. It is great to know that Lucy is safe with you. That, with the news of Greg's improving health, is the best bit I have had for many moons.

Grandfather seems about the same. I know that he will come through all right; but Dr. Joe is worried. His staying right on here proves that he is, more than anything he says.

Tell Lucy I'd like a lot of letters from her, and long ones, and that I shall not be critical. The place, with you girls gone, is like a day with the morning missing. How is that from your unpoetical, but most loving brother,
NEAL.

VI

Monday, November 12, 1900.

DEAR JUDY AND LUCY: Aunt Gracia tells me that you two are worrying because I have not written to you since Grandfather's death. I am sorry to have worried you. I should have written.

We are all fairly well here. The weather is cold, but

sunny. Chris and Irene are leaving for New York tomorrow.

If I can get Steve Rofus to take the job of running the ranch for a year or two, I am planning to enter Oregon Agricultural College in February. We know that Steve is looking for a job, since Justin sold; but whether we can get him for what we can pay, I don't know. We'll go fairly high, because he is the best man in the county, and, now, more than ever before, I feel that I must have more adequate knowledge.

Getting Steve was Grandfather's suggestion. I had the last talk with him that anyone had. Two hours on the night of the thirtieth. As I suppose the others have told you, that was the night before he died. My best regards to Greg.

Your loving brother,
NEAL.

CHAPTER XX

I

LYNN MACDONALD'S reaching fingertips touched smooth wood. She glanced at the page in her hand. After all, it was the ending; fiction could scarcely have improved upon it. What was it that Lucy had said in one of her letters—something about life permitting where literature refused? She returned the page in her hand to its fraying creases and its envelope. "Poor loving brother Neal," she murmured, and shook her head, and for a relaxing second drooped with a sigh.

She straightened, stood, jerking impatiently at stiffness, walked across the room to her bookshelves, and stooped to the row of fat encyclopedias. "Har to Hur," she pulled from the shelf, and added "Sai to Shu" to it.

A knock, demand nicely moderated by deference, tapped on her door.

"Shall I have your car brought around, Miss MacDonald, or shall I order your breakfast?"

"Sai to Shu" sprawled on the floor. Miss MacDonald said: "Heavens on earth! What time is it?"

"It is seven o'clock, Miss MacDonald. I came early this morning."

"But, but," stuttered the crime analyst, "the charwoman hasn't been in. She didn't come in, last night. I was going home whenever she came. How stupid!"

"I am sorry, Miss MacDonald. I met her as I was leaving last evening, and warned her not to disturb you."

Miss Kingsbury, surely an intentionally impudent fanfare of warm water, sudsy with soap and bath salts, of pinking cold showers, of vigorous Turkish towels, of stiff toothbrushes pungent with creamy paste, of tingling scalps, of the benison of eye cups, of the rewards of rest, sanity, and intelligent living, rescued "Sai to Shu" from the floor.

"May I find something for you in this, Miss MacDonald?"

"Put it in its place, if you will. I have finished with it."

"Har to Hur" stopped a gap in the shelves.

"And now, please, do telephone to the garage for my car."

Fingers, brisk with weariness, folded letters and slipped them into tired old envelopes. Grapefruit, coffee, bacon and eggs. Naughty Uncle Phineas; Olympe with a lifted chin. A bath—first of all, a bath. Lovely Aunt Gracia. Handsome Gibson man, Chris. Coffee, and a crunching roll, and coffee. Your loving brother, Neal. Poor supersentimentalist, fighting mere homely sentiment—poor, loving brother Neal. Blue-eyed, blonde and fuzzy Stanlaws lady. Love, and Lucy. Pansy-faced children of Reginald Birch. A very warm bath, and green bath salts. Grandfather. Pan——

"They are sending your car at once. May I help you with these, Miss MacDonald?"

"Thank you. And lock them in the safe, if you will."

A list of the notes she had begun to make in case, toward the end, things should go astray.

1. Accident.
Neal blamed.
2. Richard *offers* to exchange rooms with Irene.
After accident.
3. Baptism.
4. Murder committed after missionaries and Chinaman had left the ranch.
5. Dying words.
Red mask.
6. Locked doors. Unlocked doors.
Keys under lamp.
7. Rope.
Bed moved.
8. Olympe's revolver, .32 Colt's.
9. Revolver used for murder, .38 Colt's.

Absurd, all of it. She tore the paper into bits and tossed them into her wastebasket.

"And now, please, Miss Kingsbury, get this hotel on the telephone—here is the card—and make an appointment for me with a Dr. Joseph Elm who is staying there. This afternoon—let me see; yes, for three o'clock."

II

Dr. Joseph Elm failed, wretchedly, with his attempt to put a smile across the trouble of his face.

Lynn MacDonald insisted, "But the lady, Olympe, is dead, Dr. Elm?"

He nodded at some woebegone thing a mile or two away in the distance.

"Then, why won't that do? Lucy worked it out very cleverly. A .32 calibre Colt's. A .38 calibre. You falsified about the size of the bullet to save Olympe? No one will remember. Yours was the only testimony concerning the size of the bullet. It does leave us with the rope, of course; but the rope may easily remain mysterious in the light of your confession. Surely caring about this thing as you care, you are not going to be thwarted because of one helpful lie?"

Dr. Elm's broad chest rose high, fell deep. "Look; what do I care about a lie, one way or the other? I can do it all right. Easy. Trouble is, when it comes to lies, I've been kind of choosy about them. I can lie as well as my neighbour; but I like to like my lies. There is something about this one that—that kind of stirs my fur. I don't know. Olympe was a nice lady, and a good friend of mine. Well, of course, if that's the best we can do, we'll do it—or try to."

"I am sorry, Dr. Elm, to disappoint you. That did seem the most usable theory. But, since you dislike it so much, let me think. A case against Irene——"

"No! Look. Irene's alive—she's got babies."

"I meant, of course, merely that she should have got rid of the gun, after suicide. But you won't have that, either—not suicide, of course. Olympe would do so well—— But it has to be an outsider, is that it? The snow is going to make it difficult, frightfully difficult, to be convincing."

"I was wondering, Miss MacDonald. Now suppose

you could come up with me to Q 2. We'd work you in as a close, warm friend of Lucy's. You said you'd like to know her. The folks would be right glad to have you as a guest. And money doesn't matter to them; anything you'd care to ask, they'd care to double——"

"No, Dr. Elm. There'd be no purpose in that. I can think as well here in my office as I could think there. I'll do my best, I promise you. Perhaps I may have some inspiration, later, about the outsider. After all, when one tries, there is almost nothing that one can't do with circumstantial evidence, except to prove any theory that is founded upon it."

"I thought, maybe," Dr. Elm persisted, "that the folks at the ranch could give you some bits of evidence that weren't in the letters. Trouble is, I got another wire from Judy this morning. I 'phoned her last night—but she couldn't talk. Neal isn't getting any better. Jehoshaphat, what wouldn't I give for the truth!"

Lynn MacDonald's pleasant features twisted. "The—truth! But, Dr. Elm, you of all people know the truth. You have read the letters."

Dr. Elm merely grasped more tightly the arms of his chair; but Lynn MacDonald drew back, and widened her eyes and dipped her chin to a question.

"Look. We need a fresh start, my girl. A straight one, this time. Do you mean to say that you know the truth about who murdered Dick Quilter?"

"Dr. Elm, do you mean to sit there, glaring at me, and tell me that you—you of all people on earth—don't know who killed Dick Quilter? Don't know, and do need me to tell you?"

"God bless my soul to glory! Are you trying to say that you think I did it?"

Her laugh winged out, but its flight was short. "I am sorry, Dr. Elm. Forgive me."

"Certainly. Certainly. Don't mention it. But when you get all good and ready—— You see, I'm roasted nicely; I'm all ready to turn, and take up and eat."

"I am sorry. I——"

"Look. Do you know who murdered Dick Quilter?"

"I do, Dr. Elm. That is, I know it as well as anything can be known that has not been accurately proved. However, I think we can get the proof, the positive proof, later."

"Who did murder Dick Quilter?"

"Dr. Elm, since you really don't know, and since I have to tell you, I believe I would better begin at the very start, if you don't mind. For one thing, perhaps your ignorance has taken a bit from my surety. Will you answer a question or two for me, first?"

"Do you mean that Olympe Quilter really did murder her nephew? By Gad, I don't believe it!"

"See here, Dr. Elm. I told you that I thought I knew the truth. I told you that I had no proofs. Now your ignorance has changed certain aspects of the case. If you will furnish me with the proofs I need—not all of them, the end must come later, with a confession, but with some of them—and if your proofs fit my theory, I'll tell you what I have decided. If your proofs should happen to ruin my theory—I'll not tell you. That is positive, Dr. Elm. And, though you will hate me, you should be grateful to me for it.

"Now then: Has Neal Quilter recently fallen in love?"

"Heavens, yes, if you want to know. And if three years can be called recent. Fine, good, strong woman. She loves him. He loves her. Plenty of money, plenty of interests in common, plenty of time for babies, plenty of everything, and nothing but this fool notion of Neal's is keeping them apart."

"Good! Now, then: what was the nature of the disease from which Richard Quilter was suffering?"

"You know, it said in the letters, chronic stomach trouble."

"Is that all you are willing to give me, Dr. Elm?"

"Look. Isn't that enough? You'd think so, if you'd ever had it."

"You are asking for the truth from me, Dr. Elm. And yet you won't give it to me. Was Richard Quilter's trouble cancer? And did you promise him, because of—what was it—'ten generations of clean-bodied men and women' never to let any of his family know that this was, or would have been, the cause of his death?"

"Adeno carcinoma of the liver. Lot of people thought it could be inherited in those days. We didn't want to scare the children—that was it, chiefly: afraid of marrying; afraid of babies. It was better untold."

"Your autopsy, performed largely in the interest of science, completely verified your original diagnosis, Dr. Elm?"

"Yes. I was cold-blooded. We didn't have the X-rays in those days."

"No, no. I understand. The medicine you gave him contained a strong opiate of some sort, of course. Had

he taken any of it that night, or could you tell, from the autopsy?"

"I could tell. He had not taken a drop of it."

"Good. Now, then: about the footprints——"

"I don't know one dang thing about any footprints. I thought there weren't any."

"I shouldn't have said that. You see, the letters made such a point of the absence of footprints that, while I was reading, last night, I thought rather fancifully to myself of the disclosures as footprints. Step by step, almost from the first one of Lucy's letters, the whole thing was so absolutely evident, the intangible footprints were so sure and so straight, that an unimportant thing like actual footprints in the snow being necessary for a solution seemed—well, perfectly absurd."

Dr. Elm said, "'Sands of time.' McGuffey, I guess. All the poetry I ever knew I got from McGuffey, 'Make our lives sublime, and departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time.'"

"Precisely," said Lynn MacDonald.

"Now," said Dr. Elm, "that's over with. Who murdered Dick Quilter?"

CHAPTER XXI

I

A GRAY kitten batted the tip end of a fern flowing green to the tiles of the sunroom's floor, leaped three feet, killed an inch of fringe on the rug, toppled flat, waved coral set paws, and purred.

Dr. Elm snapped alluring fingers and said: "Puss? Puss? Puss? Look, Judy, I didn't think you'd take it like this. I don't think this is the right way for you to take it, my girl."

Judith loosed tightened lips to tremble words. "Only—— I can't believe it, Dr. Joe. I mean—— How could Neal possibly have forgotten?"

"It is easier to say, maybe, how could Neal, being Neal, possibly have remembered? Of course though, Judy, we aren't dead certain and can't be, for a while, that Neal did forget. That part of it was Miss MacDonald's one and only piece of guesswork. Jehoshaphat, though, I hope she was right about it!"

"Yes. If she is right about—the other, I suppose we have to hope for that, too."

"She is right, Judy. There is no getting away from what she called her footprints. They walk right through the letters, making a path so plain it looks to me, now, like nobody but a fool could have missed it. Lucy's second letter to you makes the first track. Maybe it

he taken any of it that night, or could you tell, from the autopsy?"

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"Yes. If she is right about—the other, I suppose we have to hope for that, too."

"She is right, Judy. There is no getting away from what she called her footprints. They walk right through the letters, making a path so plain it looks to me, now, like nobody but a fool could have missed it. Lucy's second letter to you makes the first track. Maybe it

would take a crime analyst to discover it; but, in the third letter, the path starts off, good and deep, and follows straight along through Neal's last letter to you—not a misstep, not a detour, not a doubt. Soon as we can find time, we'll go through them, if you want to, and trace them along. I thought I could tell you all the points—but I must have missed some, if you aren't convinced."

"I am. I have to be. Except - Neal's forgetting."

"Look, Judy. I don't need to tell you about the findings of modern psychology. You understand it better than I do. But would you like to kind of whittle through Neal's case with me, the way Miss MacDonald explained it—smart as a whip, that girl is—to kind of refresh your memory and help you understand about Neal?"

"I wish we might, Dr. Joe. You are wrong about my understanding the new psychology. I don't understand it very well. I never have."

"No; and who does? I shouldn't have said 'understand'—I should have said 'believe in,' maybe, or some such thing. We don't understand gravitation, or love, or sin, or electricity, or—much of anything. But we believe in them because we've been forced to."

"Well, to begin with, Miss MacDonald says that Neal is a supersentimentalist. That's why he has always fought sentimentality to the last ditch, and derided it. He knew how extra-sentimental he was, and he was ashamed of it; hated it like he'd have hated a club-foot; inferiority complex right there, to use the jargon, to begin with. What Neal should have done was

to have married real young, as Dick did. Then he'd have had a nice conventional outlet for his floods of sentiment—love of his wife and babies. That's a lot different from loving his aunties and uncles and sisters. He didn't marry. And, along in mid-adolescence, a dog-gone unfortunate thing happened.

"He got the idea of marriage muddled up in his mind with all the distress and fear and self-humiliation that had ever come to him. Never had a worry in his life—I mean a real, serious one—until Chris came home, and the woman Chris had married started all the distress about selling Q 2. Too sentimental, too loyal, to blame Chris—or even Chris's wife—blame it on marriage. You know, Lucy quotes him as saying a blameless young man and a pleasant girl married will make a curse or a crime. Then, Chris and Irene were hugging and kissing and loving and being as sentimental, here, there, and everywhere, as they darned pleased. Neal was jealous—though he didn't know it, of course—so that made him hate marriage (their liberty), and himself, worse than ever.

"Look. Who let him out of his locked room that night and directed him to Dick's room, where he found Dick killed? The woman Chris had married. Who made a fool of him with her fake murder business? The woman Phineas had married. Further back: What caused his father to kill a man? (That went awful hard with Neal, and I knew it, at the time.) The man your Aunt Gracia was going to marry. Blame any of the folks? Same as I said before—too loyal, too sentimental. Lots easier to blame marriage. Marriage, you see this, Judy, mixed

up with the dark experiences of his life; mixed up with murder, grief, despair, fear, self-disgust. Look—a firm resolve never to have any truck with marriage. Or, if you like it better, a marriage complex. About as easy for a loving, sentimental lad like Neal to endure, as a boil on the end of his nose.

“It didn’t look so pretty, and he knew it. He stopped talking about it, soon as he got a little older, and hoped folks wouldn’t notice it. Before long, he stopped looking cross-eyed, so’s he could see it himself. He began to look—well, crooked, out of the sides of his eyes so’s he couldn’t see it at all. Got the habit of looking crooked. Forgot the boil; and it was a relief, you can bet on that. Here I am, though—that’s what always happens to me when I try to do fancy work with my words—with a boil on Neal’s nose, when I want a complex against marriage stored away in his mind’s dark chambers and forgotten. Stowed right next on the shelf to the secret he had to keep; the secret that smashed his life to chips for a while—the secret he’d like to forget, but couldn’t. So far so good, Judy?”

“Yes——”

“So far so bad would be more like it, I guess. Well, here on the ranch, giving his heart to it, giving his energy and his time to it, having you Quilter women to compare with the women he met, making them look pretty small, Neal didn’t have much of a fight with this marriage complex until Mrs. Ursula Thornton showed up. (Maybe I should have told you that Miss MacDonald went at all this a little differently from what I have. She began this analysis of Neal and his com-

plexes about sixteen or seventeen years farther back than I have. Freud, you know. But that always seemed like drawing a pretty long bow, to me.) Anyway, Ursula wasn't so much unlike your mother, Judy, nor so much unlike you girls. She came about as close to being a Quilter as she could come without having been born into the family: beautiful, smart, good—all the attributes. Neal loved her on the dot. She loved him. No use beating around the bush—that's what happened.

"Fine and dandy? Look; not so you could notice. Here comes the marriage complex. Let's turn it into the boil again on the end of his nose. Neal can't see it any longer. Eyes are set for looking crooked, the other way. Neal has plumb forgot he had it. What's the trouble then? It's still there—that's the trouble. It's been there, all these years, growing bigger and meaner all the time.

"Marriage means to Neal, by this time, murder, disgrace, terror, humiliation. Will he accept it? He will not. Who would? Will he get around it? He will, if he can. Will he admit that he doesn't want to marry the woman he loves? Lord bless us—he can't. He doesn't know it. You can't admit something you don't know. What's he going to do, then?"

Judith said: "Make a substitution. Put an unreal reason for his refusal to marry in the place of the real reason?"

"That's it. Next job for Neal is to find the substitute. Substitutes, in cases of this kind, aren't always so doggone easy to find. Neal had his, right at hand. All he needed to do was to tinker it some, and it was in

good shape for use. I mean the secret that had been burdening him, torturing the living soul out of him for years. He didn't want that secret, Judy. He never had wanted it. Look, here's what happened.

"Up bobs Mr. Modern Devil, alias repressions, and just as sly and wicked as the old-fashioned red one with horns and a tail. Up he comes from modern hell, our subconscious minds—just as black and rotten a region as the old brimstone-and-fire affair—and he says, 'Leave it to me.'

"'That secret,' says Mr. Modern Devil, 'isn't any use to us. Turn it into a reason for your not marrying, and make it of some account.'

"Easy enough for Neal to do. He'd had the idea in his mind, anyway, since 1900. Look. Here we have it. 'A man who murdered his own father is not fit to marry. I murdered my own father. I am not fit to marry.' Slick? Good reason for avoiding marriage. And, Neal being Neal, the supersentimentalist, the secret revised into a form that seems, anyhow, a little easier to bear.

"Just one thing is the matter now. It is a nasty, poisonous mess, this work of Neal's personal devil. A sane mind can't function with a mess of that kind in it, any more than a healthy stomach could function, properly, with a dish of poisonous toadstools in its middle. But, thank the Lord—or, maybe, Miss MacDonald—we've got the antidote to feed Neal: The truth."

"He won't take it, Dr. Joe. He scorns, hates modern psychology."

"Sure he does. Why wouldn't he? He's afraid of it—scared to death of it."

"Yes, I know. But, if he won't take it, what are we going to do?"

"Remember how the ads used to read in pre-prohibition days? 'A few drops in his coffee. Taste not detectable.' Look, Judy. I mean we can tell Neal the truth without labelling it psychology, can't we? The truth is all he needs. Truth, in these cases, is the catharsis—the cure. Miss MacDonald kind of held out for an absolute verbal acknowledgment. She says that will be by a long shot the best. But I know, darn well, that, even if we can't get the acknowledgment from him in words, it will be all right if we can get him to make it to himself. Yes, and there's a lot of stuff about reëducation after freeing the repression. But I'll bet you that, if Neal has the truth, Ursula will do for the reëducation.

"Look, though, Judy. We'll have to be real delicate about feeding him the truth. I'd suggest sort of oozing it into him. We don't want to gag him with it, and choke him to death. I told Miss MacDonald not to worry about that for a minute. Tact, I told her, was your middle name. I knew you could manage it fine."

"I?"—a mouse of a word, caught in a trap and squeaking.

"How do you mean, Judy?"

"Dr. Joe, dear Dr. Joe—I can't. Won't you?"

"Oh, now, bless my soul to glory, Judy——"

"Please, Dr. Joe? You're a man, you're——"

"Hold on there, Judy! Yes? Look. Just about a minute you'd have been talking baby talk, or worse, if

I hadn't stopped you. I never trust a woman when she starts by telling me I'm a man. Flatterer. No, but, Judy, I'll try this, if you want me to. Sure I will. I think you'd do it better than I would; but, if you don't think so, I'll try—— Hezekiah and the egg, you know."

"Dr. Joe—— Dr. Joe, you're—you're——"

"Don't say it, Judy. Don't you do it."

"Divine."

"All right. Just for that, now, I'm going to send you a bill."

II

Dr. Elm gave a stiffening shake to the newspaper, and reread the recipe for hot-water pie crust. The clock on the mantel spun three cool, silver threads, and a black and red spark from the fire beneath them spit out on the polished floor. Dr. Elm rose, kicked the spark to the hearth, fumbled in his pocket for a cigar, bit the end of it, and returned it to his pocket.

"'Lo, Neal."

"Hel-lo, Dr. Joe! This is fine. I didn't know you'd come. Judy just now 'phoned down to me, and I rode right up. Great to see you here again. Did you have a pleasant trip to San Francisco?"

"No. Not so very. I went for my health, you know."

"I didn't know! What's the trouble, man?"

"I'm getting along, Neal. Getting pretty old. I've been thinking, here lately, that I'll likely be shuffling along and out of here before many months."

"Rubbish, Dr. Joe! You're fit as a fiddle. How come?"

Dr. Elm returned to the wing chair and sank heavily

into it with a slow, showy sigh. Neal curved an arm on the mantel and frowned at the fire.

"Sit down, boy. You'll burn your clothes—that fire is popping like corn. Besides, if you can spare me a few minutes, I'd like to have a little talk with you. I've got to ask kind of a favour of you, Neal. I hate it worse than hell—but I can't see any way out of it."

"Yes, you bet. But you couldn't ask a favour of me, Dr. Joe—not to save your life. Anything I could do for you would be a favour to me, and you know it. So cut the favour stuff, and go ahead from there."

"That's nice of you, Neal. I certainly appreciate it a lot. But—— Well, no matter now. Anything I've got to say will hold over all right. Kind of a shame to bother you—— I expect you'd like to hear about my trip? We'll let the other ride, for the present——"

"Dr. Joe! For the love of Pete, what did I say? See here, man—put it any way you care to put it. But, for God's sake, if I can help you——"

"That's all right. That's all right, boy. You didn't say anything. No—just changed my old fool mind, that's all."

"But you can't do it, Dr. Joe. You can't get away with it—not with me. What is it? Money? You've attended this entire family for half a century, and you've never seen the colour of Quilter money yet——"

"No, no, Neal. Not money. No, it's more serious than that. Funny, how precious our old, miserable, tag-end years get to us, when we feel the last of them approaching."

"See here, Dr. Joe. You're the best friend I have on

earth—the best friend any Quilter has. Now, a minute ago, you began to tell me what I could do—what you'd allow me to do. Then I made some cursed, damn-fool break and spoiled it all. I'm not going to sleep to-night until you and I get this thing straight."

"No, Neal, you didn't make any break. I just looked at you, and I thought you didn't look so well yourself. And this—this request of mine wasn't going to be pleasant for you, boy. I just thought I'd better let up on it, maybe, till you got a little more fit yourself. Look. It will keep——"

"Not on your life it won't keep. I was never sounder than I am right now. Of course, I've been a little worried here of late—one thing and another, you know how it goes—but physically I'm as tough and healthy as a Q 2 heifer."

"That's what I meant, Neal. I thought you looked kind of worried, or something. No time to be bothering you with my troubles——"

"Only that I suppose the knowledge that you are in trouble, and that you won't give me a chance to help you—if I could—would be a more serious trouble, worry, than any other I could have."

"Well, of course, if you put it that way, Neal. Look. What do you know about this new-fangled psychology stuff?"

"Not a doggone thing. And I'd like to know less. Chris shoves it at me, now and then: conscious, sub-conscious, complexes, dreams. Dreams, if you please. Rot, all of it, from beginning to end!"

"Yes? Well, I expect you're right. It always had a

phoney sound to me. But what I was wondering about it, was this: Could worry, kind of linked up with a guilty conscience, just sort of get the best of a man of my age? That's the way I feel, boy. Bless my soul to glory, I feel like if I couldn't rid myself of this eternal load of worry, get things straightened out for myself, and get away from under it, I feel like it would pound me right down into my grave. I can't sleep any more. I can't eat. I can't get anything out of a good cigar. I thought maybe a trip away would fix me up a little. Got worse. Just now, Neal, you said I couldn't ask a favour of you to save my life. Well, that's about what I'm doing. Look. I'm asking this favour, hoping that it will give me a new lease on life. I wouldn't ask you, Neal, if I knew anyone else on God's green footstool to ask——"

"Wouldn't? Well, if you say it, I guess I deserve it."

"No, no. You got me wrong there. I'd sooner ask help of you than of any other living man, except—about this one thing. It is the most painful thing in your life, boy. That's the damn trouble about bringing it up to you."

"You must mean, then, that it has something to do with—1900."

"That's about the size of it, Neal. I killed Dick."

"That's a damn lie! And you know it!"

"Take it easy, boy, if you can. I'm sorry. I knew I shouldn't unburden on you. We'll drop it. Let well enough alone. Pull the bell there, will you? I'd like a glass of water. I get these kind of rushing, dizzy spells——"

"Dr. Joe, listen. I——"

"That's all right, boy. I knew better than to tell you, but——"

"In the name of God, where did you get this mad idea? You weren't here on the ranch. You were in Portland, more than two hundred miles away."

"That's what I said at the time. I had to say it. Neal, listen a minute, if you can, before you jump down my throat. It wasn't cold-blooded murder. It was—I did it for Dick. I did it because he begged and prayed me to. I did it because he threatened, a threat he meant to keep and I knew it, that if I wouldn't do it for him, he'd ask—well, somebody else, who would."

Neal said, "A pitcher of water, please," to two white-trousered legs, and they vanished.

"You see, my boy, your father's ailment was cancer. He knew it, and I knew it. He took my promise not to tell. When he was shot, he had maybe three months of life ahead of him—maybe not so long. Three months of slow agony. He wasn't afraid of them. No. He was afraid of losing Q 2 for his family and his children and their children. He wouldn't have been afraid of that, either—not the way he was afraid—if he had been going to live to see you all through. But he wasn't going to live; and there were old people, and his sister, and his three children and an invalid boy all going to be left to shift for themselves, and nothing to shift with. He gave into Chris about selling, not because of any false pride—never knew a Quilter yet who had an ounce of it—but because he knew he wouldn't be alive another six months to keep Chris from selling. Chris was a good boy, and he's been getting better ever since; but, right then, anybody with a lick of sense knew that it was a question of now or later with Chris. Dick

knew; but he had to be certain sure of it. You're right, this weather is——"

Neal said, "All right, Gee Sing. Thanks. Skip."

"Yes, as I was saying, Dick needed to know, and he found out—if Chris didn't sell in October, he'd sell in December.

"Now your father, Neal, was your grandfather's own son. He'd been brought up on your grandfather's philosophy. Schiller, you know, and his realistic pantheism; his insistence on sacrificing the individual to the species. (Seems to me that I remember your grandfather was making a new translation of Schiller, just about that time.) And Hume, with his insistence that no act that was useful could possibly be criminal. Dick believed these principles with all his soul. His death, by accident, would be useful—damn useful. It would give his folks money to hold on to Q 2, and to provide, not only for them, but for all future generations of Quilters. If Chris had sold Q 2 in 1900, he'd have sold a lot more than the ranch. Some of the folks here said that, at the time. Dick hated like thunder to think of the old people in poverty; he hated to think of you as a farm hand; of Greg and Judy having to surrender in Colorado; of Lucy's genius winding up by ringing a school bell at nine every morning.

"These, and other things—including whether or not the Quilter family was worth saving—were the things he had to balance against cheating an insurance company that had cheated him. (He didn't balance his death. He was dying, and a quick, easy death was a mercy and a blessing.) Greatest good for the greatest

number—that weighed heavily. It was a shyster company, cheating right and left, wherever it could. Dick decided to sacrifice the company's exchequer—you know how impersonal companies seem—to the good of the species, Quilter.

“Of course I know that some men would rather see their families sink into want, would rather die a lingering, suffering death and leave their old folks on the grater of poverty, and their children's futures unprovided for, than to work a graft on a darn rotten insurance company. Some men would. I don't honestly know whether or not I'm glad that Dick, Thaddeus Quilter's son, wouldn't. But it is true, anyway. He wouldn't. And he believed, ‘No act that is useful can possibly be criminal.’

“Thinking the thing over and over, as I have, sometimes I've wondered if the old gentleman could, maybe, have anyway guessed the truth. You know how fine and flip he kept up through it all. Olympe's fake play bowled him over, for a few minutes, but he was up again and at it within the hour. Right at the head of things, managing, like he always had. Yes, fine and flip until your Uncle Phineas came home with the money for the mine. Took to his bed that night, and never got up again. It almost seemed as if that was what knocked him out—the uselessness of Dick's and my planning; the uselessness of what we'd done. Like the uselessness of it, maybe, had turned it into a crime.

“Planning? We certainly planned. Yes, but here I'm putting myself into it too soon. Before he ever said a word to me about it. Dick tried to arrange an accidental

death for himself. You remember—when the wagon tongue broke while he was driving a skittish team over Quilter Mountain? Scared the living pie out of him when he got home and found that, if he had succeeded, you'd been blamed and would have blamed yourself to your dying day. He made up his mind, then and there, that he'd play safe with the next attempt. It wasn't as easy to do as you might think. Drowning, for instance? Suicide for sure. No, he had to have it fixed so that the death could be proved, positively, to have been accidental. Neal? Neal, my boy, are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening."

"Excuse me. I kind of thought you'd dropped off to sleep, or something. Mind if I keep along with the story? Well, after the Quilter Mountain accident, Dick found, too, how your Aunt Gracia was going to feel about his dying in sin—or not in a state of grace, I guess she put it. He knew that a sudden shocking death was going to be pretty hard on the family for a while. If he could make it even a mite easier for any one of you, he was going to do it. He did. Went and got himself baptized as a Siloamite. You know, without my telling you, what that meant to your auntie, especially those last weeks before she died.

"Well, Dick planned alone, and we planned together. By Gad, Neal, but we tried. We thought that we had everything fixed slick from beginning to end. Every single member of the family locked tight in their rooms. Dick got the keys that afternoon, and did the locking himself that night. (Damn hard luck about Irene being

locked out. Jehoshaphat, but that was a bad one!) He left all the other doors in the house unlocked to make getting in and out seem easy. But he thought that the rope was the best bet of all to prove an outsider. Dick fixed the rope himself, and moved the bed, so's it would look for certain that the criminal had got out of the window, down the rope and clean away.

"He thought that Chris would climb out of the window in his room, sooner or later, and come along the roof, and get into his room and see the keys—Dick had put them there in plain sight—and let the others out of their locked rooms.

"When Irene, instead of Chris, came running into his room, Dick used his last breath to save me—and the family. He looked toward the open window and said, or tried to, that a man wearing a red mask had got away. I've wondered how he happened to say red. Maybe the colour on his nightshirt made him think of it. Maybe he thought some poor devil might be found with a black mask—but a red mask never would be found. I don't know.

"You see, boy, how it was? Planned and planned for, everything fixed. And then the damn snow came and ruined it all, ruined the whole works from beginning to end. First time in a quarter century that Quilter County had had snow in October. Snow isn't noisy. Dick in his bed, I in my hiding place—we had no notion of the snow. We'd planned it all for earlier, too; but Dick would have it that we wait until the missionaries and Dong Lee were out of the house. Suspicion wouldn't

touch a Quilter. But a religious fanatic, or a Chinaman, they'd be something else again.

"That's the end of it, I guess, Neal. No matter, much, about things from then on. This is what is killing me, boy. That all these years I've been coming a coward and a hypocrite among you folks, taking your friendship, and all that, and never daring to own up. Of course, I'm bound to stick up for myself and say that, sometimes, it still seems to me that I didn't do such an awful thing. It was hard, Neal—it was damn, damn hard; but Dick begged and prayed me to. And, of course, as the movies say, I've paid. Yes, I've paid—paid through the teeth. And now, when I'm getting old——"

"Dr. Joe, would you mind a lot, just—keeping still for a minute or two? Sorry. I've got to think. I've got to think."

In the hall a door banged, and an oak log in the fire broke down into its coals. A rill of laughter came coursing through the room, pursued by a little girl with red cheeks and a green frock. She caught her step and dipped to a courtesy. "How-do-you-do, Dr. Joe? I didn't know that you were here. I'm very glad to see you. I was looking for Mother, Uncle Neal."

Neal said, "I haven't seen Lucy for two hours."

"It is rather important. Baby Thad keeps saying, 'Wee' and it sounds as if he were speaking French."

Dr. Elm said, "Have you told your father?"

"Father is engrossed, enraptured. It was he who sent me for Mother. Oh, there's Christopher, home from Quilterville so soon. Coo-ee—— Chris?"

A sleek, yellow-haired boy parted the curtains. "What-ho, child? Why, how-do-you-do, Dr. Joe? Glad to see you. Did you drive over in your new Chaptler? Dad is going to give me a sport model Ford for my birthday. I've left off smoking. Makes me hungry all the time. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll raid the kitchen. You're invited, Delidah. Coming?"

"By Gad, Neal," Dr. Elm said, when another door had trapped the chatter and the laughter, "I can't even enjoy the kids, any more. It is killing me, and I wish it would—if it would make haste about it. I can't eat. I can't sleep——"

"Wait a minute. Shall we go up to my room? Would you as soon? It's more private there. I—— I've something to tell you, Dr. Joe. Explain. Shall we go up?"

The hall was full of sunshine. Out from the living room, the first bars of Schumann's *Abendlied* came softly, but with certainty.

Neal paused for a moment on the stairway. "That's Judy," he said. "She plays Schumann well. Ursula plays him better."

III

Dr. Elm pressed his elbows into the table and rubbed his smooth pink baldness in the palms of his hands. He said: "That's good of you, Neal. It's mighty good of you, and I appreciate it. But, of course, you couldn't expect me to believe that I'd up and—forget, or whatever you call it, about the most tragic experience of my life. No. Men lie to themselves; but they lie in their own favour. They don't make mistakes, as you've been

saying—not about whether or not they killed a friend.”

“Listen, man! I’ve listened to you. You’ve got to listen to me. Yes, you’ve got to do a damn sight more than listen. You’ve got to believe me. I know. And I’ll tell you how I know.

“In a way it makes it more incredible; but, get this, Dr. Joe, I’m under oath. I’m telling you God’s own truth. I am swearing to you that, for the past two years or more, until about half an hour ago—somewhere along in your talk to me—I have thought exactly the same thing about myself. I am swearing to you, Dr. Joe—swearing, remember—that I’ve done what you’ve done, and what you declare it is impossible for men to do. I have forgotten; that is, I’ve got things all twisted. I thought, and I believed—as you believe about yourself—that I killed Father; I myself. If it is necessary, to convince you, I’ll drag Judy into this. I’d rather not; but I will, to get you straightened out. I told Judy, here about two weeks ago, that I had killed Father.”

“Now, now, Neal. You and Judy——”

“Damn it! I’m not a liar. We won’t get any place if you keep this up. I’ve known for years that my mind and my senses played tricks on me. You must have had similar experiences? Try to remember. Haven’t you been fooled, by yourself, before this, on less important matters?”

“Yes. Yes, I have. I imagine most men have. But that’s everyday, come-along business.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I know this. My case was a lot worse than yours is. I had had all the facts, the same as you had them, and from the same source—I’m positive

of that. You remembered most of the facts. I had forgotten every last one of them. I'd forgotten that Father planned his own death. I was in a lot worse condition than yours, because I'd got so addled that I thought I stepped into Father's room that night and shot him—just as any other brute of a murderer might have done—to gain something for myself. I'd forgotten that Father had cancer. I'd forgotten every damn thing, but that Monday night and Irene—with blood on her wrapper.

“Do I know how to sympathize with you? Say! Do I? I've been living in hell here, for the last few years. I've been getting worse all the time. Lord, but it's queer—the things men's minds will do! Night after night I've walked this floor fighting suicide. You remembered the extenuations. I forgot every damn thing. If this hadn't come up to-day—I don't know. I was about as near crazy as a man could get, and stay sane.”

Dr. Elm puffed out a long-drawn breath. “Hot,” he said, “up here. Too hot. Bless my soul to glory if I can understand you, Neal. You thought you'd done it, you say, until I told you that I had. Look. Now you seem to be saying that you know I didn't. No. No, you're too deep for me.”

“I thought I had done it—I'm a fool with words—I thought I had done it until you talked to me. Until I heard you explaining—much as I had had it explained to me twenty-eight years ago. I could hear the very words I had heard before; see the gestures; feel the—horror? shock? Well, whatever I felt, then, it was pretty bad. Word for word this afternoon, all of it over again: Father's illness; his plan to save the ranch and the family;

his accident; the change of rooms on account of distance; his baptism; the waiting for the missionaries to leave—I'd heard it all before, Dr. Joe, as you'd heard it and at about the same time, twenty-eight years ago. The rope to mislead us. All of us locked in our rooms. The mistake about Irene. And then—I guess the real tragedy—the snow. Good God, what the sight of that impossible October snow must have meant! How, in the name of suffering, could I have forgotten? How could I have heard it all explained—and forgotten it! But I did. I had. That's that. And so have you."

"Look, Neal. I'm wondering whether there could be something in this new psychology, after all? If we could dig the explanations of our tricky minds, as you say, out of it, maybe?"

"Lord, no! Nothing like that. It is altogether different—sexy stuff, dreams, gosh knows what all; offensive and silly. No, this is plain common sense. All this amounts to, I guess, is a lapse of memory. The strangest part of it is that both of us, you and I, should have had the same lapse—brain storm used to be the word. But we have had it—that's evident. And, again, that's that. After all, it is another proof of how even the best friends can be strangers. Here we've been, living in hells of our own devising, when any time in the past years, if we'd got together and talked, we'd probably have set each other free—got the truth, as we have to-day.

"You mean—— You think you have the truth, Neal?"

"Think? I know I have. Gosh, I can't get over it. Queerest experience I have ever heard of a man having.

And then, on top of that, discovering that my best friend has had exactly the same experience."

"Do you mean, when you say you have the truth, that you know who killed Dick? You say you know I didn't do it. All right. If I didn't do it, who did?"

"Look at it this way. Father made his plan. He needed help. He had to have sure, competent help. He needed a cool head and a steady hand. He needed a pile of courage—before and after. He needed self-command and discretion. He needed someone who was willing to sacrifice his peace of mind for all his remaining years, and to sacrifice a problematical eternity, for the sake of the Quilter family. He needed all the virtues, and one small saving grace of sin. Who, then, would he have told of his cancer, and have turned to for his help?"

"Your Aunt Gracia?"

"No. I hoped you'd see it. You haven't? That puts it up to me. He'd want me to tell you. He wasn't afraid to load his gun and carry it next door into Father's room that night and—back again to his own room. He wasn't afraid, at the end, to tell me. I mean, Dr. Joe—Grandfather."

THE END

